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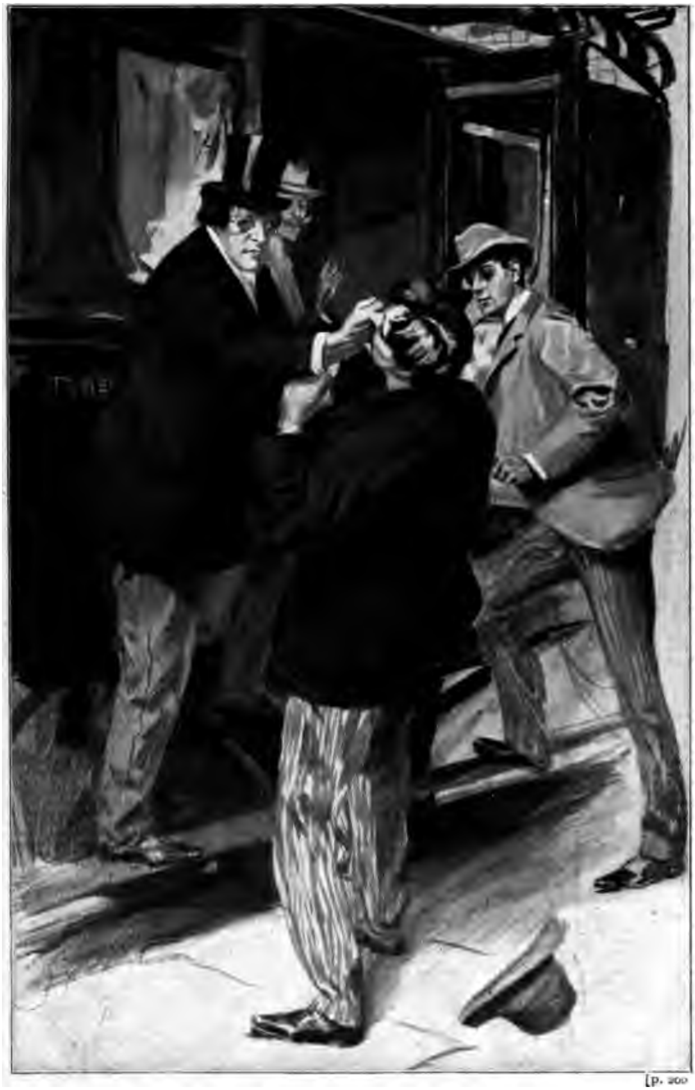

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"'MY COMPLIMENTS!' ROARED THE BARON"

I. F R

The CARDINAL'S *ROSE*

A Novel

BY VAN TASSEL SUTPHEN

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THE CARDINAL'S ROSE

CHAPTER I

AT VINCENT'S GALLERY

SHE had turned at the last moment, as though moved by a hidden impulse, and her eyes seemed to be looking straight into mine. So near she stood that a fold of her gown had almost grazed my hand; a step would have put me at her side. And there the crowd surged in between us. I tried to press forward, but she was gone. Gone ! I cursed my stupidity, as I stood gazing blankly into space.

"Pardon me, young man, but that is my foot."

"My foot, I say," repeated the stout gentleman, with increasing acerbity of manner. "I'm the only person who's entitled to stand on it, and so at your earliest convenience—"

I stammered out some kind of an apology, and sank back into my chair. People were looking at me with curious attention, and I felt hot and embarrassed. The lecturer took up his parable again.

"Finally, ladies and gentlemen, I have the honor to present to your notice a characteristic scene of old Spain—the bull-ring at Seville." A bell tinkled, and the crowded amphitheatre of the Plaza de Toros flashed out upon the illuminated screen.

Well, I had made a fool of myself; no question about that. To lose my head over the apparition of a girl's face in a cinematograph picture! Could anything be more absurd?

The performance was over now, and the spectators were filing out, but I sat with my eyes fixed fast upon my programme. I was sure that people were still looking at me; there was a buzz of voices behind my back, and then somebody laughed outright. It was intolerable, and I writhed in all the unutterable pangs of self-consciousness. And yet by this time the ridiculous incident had undoubtedly been forgotten by every one in the room, with the possible exception of the stout gentleman. Some offences are mortal, or rather immortal, and that gouty foot would be a constant reminder of injury unavenged. I determined to keep my seat until the music began for the second performance, and then make an unobtrusive exit.

Vincent's Gallery is an institution in the best sense of that overworked word. Its realistic wax-works are famous everywhere, and the moral tone of its concert-hall is unexceptionable. Respectable people can go freely to Vincent's, or send their children there, without feeling obliged to take a precautionary glance over the programme. It is always all that it should be, and that means something nowadays, as we know. Incidentally, it is an enormously profitable affair, which goes to show that Virtue, as well as Vice, will pay high for what it wants.

It is a dozen years since I have been within the walls of Vincent's, but I had an hour to spare this evening, and the gallery was right on my way to the train. It would be amusing to renew my boyish acquaintance with those beautiful kings and emperors, and to taste again the shuddery delights of the Chamber of Horrors. So I paid my fifty cents and went in.

The great hall looked just about the same, although I missed some familiar faces—old-time embezzlers and murderers who had been famous enough in their day. But I am philosophical, and I recognize that there is fashion in criminology as well as in crinoline. Moreover, the rural visitors, who are eating their luncheon out of a brown-paper bag, look just the same as ever, and I love to listen to their deliciously frank comments upon the personal appearance of the crowned and sceptred effigies that surround them. The President of the United States is always spoken of with deference, but there are generally two opinions about Napoleon, and the German emperor's legs come in for a good share of unfriendly criticism.

The Hungarian band in the concert-hall has been reinforced by a new attraction—the cinematograph. Three performances a night, with an entire change of bill every two weeks, is the attractive wording of the bill-board out upon the street, and, to tell the truth, it was a desire to see the cinematograph that had taken me into Vincent's. Nowadays animated pictures are no novelty; but, as it happened, I had never seen an exhibition of that marvellous optical illusion. Here was my opportunity. So I took care to be on hand in the concert-hall when the time came for the cinematograph to exploit itself.

It was all most interesting, and I heartily enjoyed the splendid realism of Niagara and of the Empire State Express. A dozen ordinary and made-up pictures followed, and then came the scene that in an instant had served to divert the current of my life into new and unfamiliar channels.

The picture was not particularly remarkable in itself. There was the title on the programme: "On the Pier at Dover. Departure of the Calais Mail-Packet." It was only interesting because it was a scene from real life, full of action and bustle. The picture showed the pier with the packet in the background. Steam was issuing from the escape-pipes and sailing-time was evidently near at hand. Passengers and porters were jostling each other, fruit venders and newsboys hawked their wares so realistically that one could almost hear their cries. Great cranes were hoisting aboard innumerable packages and boxes, and one party of excitable Frenchmen were continually running up and down the gang-plank, cannoning into their neighbors and each other with the utmost unconcern and good-humor. And then into this scene of hurry and confusion she came, and all else was blotted out.

A slight figure in travelling-dress and storm-coat. I did not even notice her at first; indeed, my attention had already begun to flag, and the thought of train-time had occurred to me. The white glare of the screen and the constant flickering of the imperfectly working mechanism were most trying to the eyes; I half rose from my chair. Well, was it some subtle pressure from Fate's controlling hand or mere blind chance that she stopped and looked back? Call it what you will, she had felt and yielded to the impulse, and in that moment the warp and woof had been set and the shuttle had begun to move.

Does all this sound forced and unreal to the matter-of-fact mind? Was I but the victim of a disordered imagination? Remember that this was no "made-up" picture, no careful composition of puppets to amuse the idle eye. What I had seen was an actual transcription from life; it was a woman of flesh and blood who had stood there on Dover pier before the passionless eye of the recording camera. It was that very same woman whom I saw now, I who was sitting in the concert-hall of Vincent's Gallery and counting the minutes to train-time.

If the arrow be well shot it will find a target somewhere. The appeal at least was definite and insistent; through all the intervening media of time and of space it rang out clear and strong, a message impossible to misunderstand and still less to ignore. And that message had come to me! Shall we say "Kismet" then—the word may conveniently stand for everything that is extra-conscious and presumably unknowable.

By this time I had forgotten my recent humiliation; and as for trains, there were plenty of later ones. The same pictures would be shown again after the band had played a couple of numbers, and I waited impatiently for the closing chords. There! that was done with at last! Now for the people to get into their seats; the hall was being darkened, the lecturer was at his post. How intolerably slow everybody was—would we never get started! Niagara and all the rest of that rubbish, and then at last: "On the Pier at Dover. Departure of the Calais Mail-Packet."

The same scene of rush and confusion, but I was looking at it now with different eyes; I was waiting for some one to come. In the mean time I noticed some details that had before escaped me. A man on the extreme right was pasting upon a bulletin-board the announcement of what was evidently a newspaper extra. I could read the words in big type at the top of the sheet: "Cambridge wins!" Undoubtedly the reference was to the 'Varsity boat-race; well, hurrah for the Light Blue!

Deep in the swirl of the crowd, my eye fell upon another figure, and I noticed how his look shifted here and there as he stood motionless at the cabin gangway. Was he, too, waiting for some one? A fine soldierly figure and a pleasant face, albeit somewhat disfigured by an unusually aggressive "pompadour." I will remember that face.

There was a little movement in the crowd, and she had come again. I watched her make her way to the centre of the pier, and I now saw that she was accompanied by two men, the one elderly, the other his junior by thirty years or more. The party had now advanced to a point directly opposite the gangway, and for the moment an incredible misgiving oppressed my mind. Perhaps this time she would not look back; idiot that I was, I hardly dared to breathe. Fortunately the laws of physics are immutable, and I had distressed myself unnecessarily—there! She was looking now. I tried to think collectedly; I would note down each feature, line by line, and mark by mark. As though a man needed the anthropometric chart of a Bertillon in order to recognize the face of a friend!

Again it was but that fleeting glance, but I knew that I should not forget. The elderly man had tapped her upon the shoulder, and now she was following him up the gang-plank. The younger man lingered behind for a moment or two; I was dimly conscious that he was talking with the man of the pompadour hair. Then he too boarded the steamer, and the three disappeared through the door leading to the saloon. Half a dozen more clicks of the machinery and the light went out; the picture had run its course.

There was to be still a third and final exhibition of the cinematograph, and I need hardly say that I was again among the spectators. I kept my eyes fixed hard upon "Monsieur Pompadour," as I had mentally christened him, for I had an odd sort of feeling that this time something was to happen, and that I must not miss it. Was there some mysterious connection between him and the three people in whose every movement I had now taken so deep an interest? As I had noted during the preceding exhibition of the picture, something had passed between the young man and the patient watcher at the gangway—something that suggested a secret understanding. It might be worth my while to keep an eye upon these two.

The panorama passed as before; but this time I took a long look at the elderly man and his young companion. The old gentleman I put down as the young woman's father, or at least a near relative. I noticed that he carried a tin despatch-box, and there was something wrong with the lock. He stopped and tried to force the hasp into place, but it would not catch. I could see that the younger man, attired, by-the-way, in a magnificent coat of Russian sables, was standing at the elderly man's side; apparently he was offering his assistance in the subduing of the refractory lock.

Well, what was it that happened so quickly? Some movement so rapidly executed as to baffle even my concentrated attention had passed between the two men. I could not be sure of anything, but it gave me the impression of the sleight of hand with which a skilful prestidigitator makes a pass at cards. We think that it is stupid of us not to catch it, but in reality the human eye stands a poor show before the trained skill of the conjurer. It is not that the eye is slower than the hand, but it is so easy to distract it at the one critical, infinitesimal moment.

The picture was over, but the lecturer announced that for the amusement of the audience it would be shown again, and this time running backward through the machine. There was a flutter among the spectators, and everybody looked eagerly at this curious reversal of natural order.

At the last moment of the original scene a sailor had swung himself over the steamer's rail and dropped lightly to the pier below. I now saw him on the dock, half-crouching as he had fallen, then rising swiftly through the air and vaulting backward to the steamer's deck. It was amusing, and the audience applauded.

The machinery clicked on, and now my two suspects, the young man in the fur coat and the watcher at the gangway, were holding their momentary conversation. And then I saw "Pompadour" take a small package from a breast-pocket and slip it into "Fur Coat's" hand. Keep clearly in mind that all this was the reverse of what had actually happened.

Again the young man had edged up to where the old gentleman was fumbling with the lock of the despatch-box; now they were standing close together; I looked with all my eyes, and just then a peculiar thing happened.

The mechanism of the cinematograph was not working well—the recording-roll did not take kindly to the reversing process. The picture flickered wildly, halted for an instant, and then stopped altogether. And there, fixed in the very act, was the gentleman of the fur coat, his hand unmistakably concealed under the lid of the despatch-box. The camera, recording the scene at the rate of fifty photographs a second, had not been deceived, and now, by a fortuitous chance, it had been permitted to reveal what the human eye could never have seen nor noted for itself. And the secret had been shown to me.

The picture was hastily removed from the machine, and the exhibition proceeded. I left the gallery and made my way to a hotel, for I had now missed even the latest train, and must perforce spend the night in town. I went to bed at once, but not to sleep; my mind was obstinately busy with the problem just presented to it in so curious a fashion.

Time and time again I went over the sequence of events, and tried to set down the logical deduction. Undoubtedly, the party of three were travelling together, and were on terms of close intimacy. And yet the young man in the fur coat had taken base advantage of a moment when the girl was looking away and the attention of the elderly man was also preoccupied. He had deliberately abstracted from the despatch-box—a packet, a letter? No matter what it was, he had taken it by stealth, and a moment later he had conveyed it into the keeping of "M. Pompadour." Something, then, that the young man must obtain, even at the cost of a crime, and yet dared not keep for a moment in his own possession.

I say crime advisedly, for this was no common sneak-thief performance. The attire and bearing of the man in the fur coat proclaimed an assured standing in the great world, and his confederate was also a gentleman, if appearances mean anything. It made it all the worse that at the very moment when the contemptible action was committed, the old man had laid his hand affectionately upon his young friend's shoulder and was looking smilingly into his eyes. It was treachery, then, and black and base as treachery must ever be.

Again the picture seemed to unroll itself before my eyes, and that haunting, wistful face looked out at me from the flickering screen. Evil had been abroad; could it have concerned her? And then, in a sudden revulsion of feeling, I gave over the whole thing. Whatever had happened, it was no concern of mine, and never could be. Moreover, it was quite likely that the picture had been taken one, two, even three years back. The story, whatever it was, had been marked *finis* long ago. I was only making an idiot of myself; and all the clocks were striking three. I would compel myself to sleep; there were the sheep jumping over the fence—fifty-two, fifty-three, fifty-four—

CHAPTER II

THE "AGONY COLUMN"

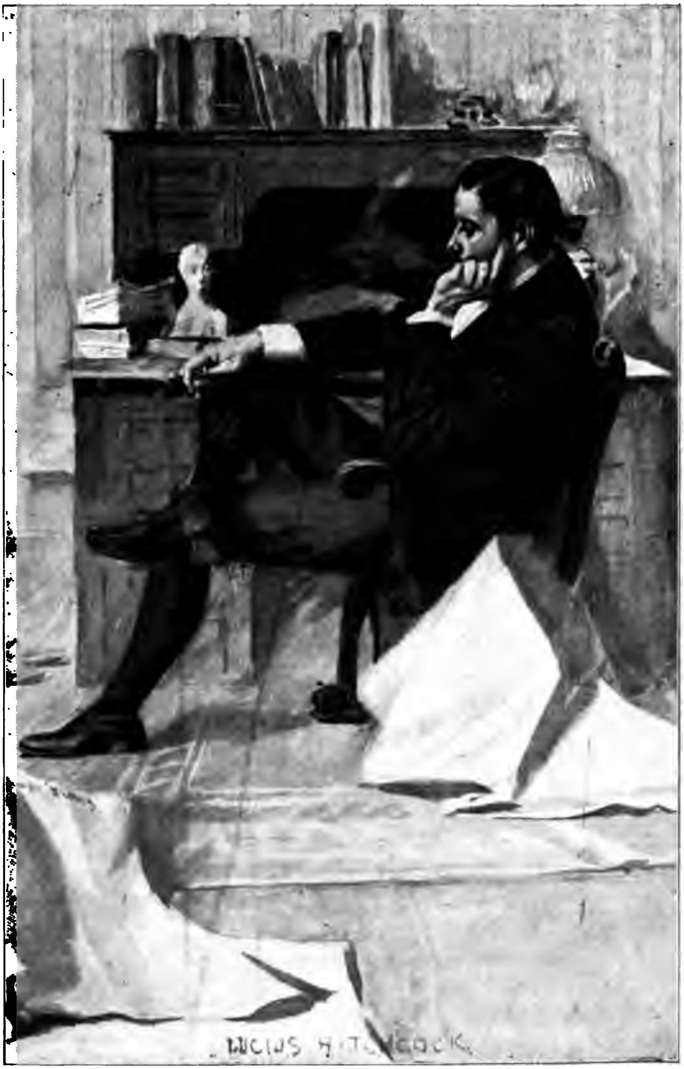
WITH the general run of my acquaintances, I am set down as a sober-sided individual, not exactly dull, but still one of the last to be invited when it is a question of lively company. Certainly, no one would suspect me of cherishing any hidden fires of romance in my mature breast, and, to tell the truth, I have lost most of my illusions. Perhaps I ought to be grateful to golf that I have not wholly degenerated into the prosaic role of looker-on. As for the rest, you have it in the fewest possible words:

Nicholas Cary, unmarried, assistant editor of the *New World* Review, and a clubman in a moderate way. I live in a suburban town for the sake of the golf, which is really very good, and, incidentally, I thereby avoid jury duty in the city. My editorial work through the day, as much of golf as I can work in during these long June afternoons, and a pipe and Balzac for the evening. Routine? Well, yes; but it is a pleasant one, and I am used to it. After one is fairly in the harness, it is the better plan to draw ahead steadily. A stop simply means that the dead load must be started again.

In confidence, however, I am not always resigned to resting quietly in my little corner and watching the world go by. After all, I am only part way in my third decade, and there are moments when I seem to catch again the echoes of a larger life. The inflections in a woman's voice, the green and gold riot of April meadows, the west wind among the pines; these are small things, but at times they seem to make up the sum of all that there is in life. Then I recollect that my Spain is already overcrowded with castles, and I go out and play golf. Contentment is a great thing, say the philosophers—some would affirm that it is the greatest of all. Perhaps they are right. I try to think so, and I was flattering myself that I had succeeded pretty well. But that was before I had strayed into Vincent's Gallery to kill half an hour of time. Now I am not so sure.

I began sensibly enough, when I had a chance to think everything over in the clear light of day. I told myself decidedly that any further interest that I might choose to take in "Mademoiselle Incognita," "Fur Coat," and the others, must be purely analytic in its nature. Here was a problem to be solved, a question to be answered: was it worth my while to bother with them? The decision was not one that could be given off-hand, and I had to take the puzzle with me to the office, where it continued to obtrude its absurd claims for an undivided hearing upon my harassed inner consciousness. And it was "make-up" day, too! I finally decided that I would stroll up to the gallery at five o'clock and have a talk with the voluble young man who acts as lecturer. Perhaps I may take another look at the picture, perhaps not; it is impossible to determine upon everything so long in advance.

The young gentleman was most polite, but he could tell me very little. That particular picture of the Calais mail-packet? Yes, he knew it very well—an excellent example of the perfection of cinemato-


LUCIUS HITCHCOCK

"I HAD TO TAKE THE PUZZLE WITH ME TO THE OFFICE."

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graphic work under the new process of manufacture. The picture had been on the programme but two nights; it had just been received, with a number of other films, from the London office of the company.

What was the date of the original record? As to that he could not say. Perhaps the people in the London office might be willing to supply the desired information. Here was their address, if I wished to communicate with them: 31 Grace Court, Temple Avenue, East City.

It was what I had expected. So I thanked the young man, and took a seat for the performance that was about to begin. There was a chance that I might have overlooked some detail, small in itself, and yet important in its bearing upon the mystery. And, first, as to the approximate date of the occurrence.

Reluctantly I came to the conclusion that there was nothing in the picture that could enable me to fix upon this first element of my working hypothesis; it was not even certain that the record had been made during the present year, 1899. The practical use of the cinematograph dated back half a dozen years, and the celluloid films could be made up at any time, and used for an indefinite period. Judging from the heavy clothing worn by the actors in the scene, the time of year was probably winter or early spring. But the Channel trip is usually an inclement one, and a fur coat might be comfortable enough so late as April, or even so early as October.

An inspiration! The *affiche* upon the newspaper bulletin-board? I could read the big black letters plainly: "Cambridge Wins!" and the announcement could refer only to the annual boat-race between the rival universities. I follow all sport with interest, and I now recollected that the Light Blue had indeed won in April of the present year. The exact date I could get easily enough from a newspaper-file. Moreover, if I were not mistaken, it was the only victory for the Cantabs in several years. If so, I had my first step.

Jones of the *Planet* is an old friend, and the files of the paper were entirely at my service. Eagerly I ran them down. Ah, here it was at last! I was right in my recollection of the event; Cambridge had beaten Oxford on March 25th, in the comparatively slow time of twenty-one minutes and four seconds. At the bottom of the cable despatch was printed a summary of the annual race, running back to 1876. Oxford's unbroken string of victories had but just come to an end; Cambridge had won in 1899 for the first time since 1889.

This established the date beyond a question. It was absolutely certain, then, that the camera had made its interesting record upon the afternoon of March 25th of this present year, and of course the scene of the occurrence was already known to me. To-day was the 10th of June, or only ten weeks later, and it was quite possible that the drama at which I had been so strangely invited to assist was only just beginning. I had my first step, but it conducted to a path that led far away from the quiet round of my daily life. Should I stop now at the parting of the ways, or should I go on? Prudence, common-sense — there could be no doubt as to what they would advise. Let Nicholas Cary stick to his Balzac and to his golf, and be content to continue in the quiet and respectable station of life into which it has pleased God to call him. There are worse blunders in life than an error in a proof-sheet, more serious annoyances than the losing of a ball when the match is all square at the eighteenth tee.

If I stopped now—well, life would go on much as it has done for a dozen years past. I might want something more, but I should be a fool to expect it. Bodies in a state of equilibrium are not to be lightly disturbed.

To go on, did I say? After all, was I so sure that the road lay clear before me? With everything summed up, I knew nothing definite except the date of an inexplicable incident happening in a foreign country, and now two months old. If this was my first step, it had landed me up against a blind wall.

Now it may not be possible to force one's way through solid brick and mortar, but over some walls it is possible to climb. Had I really seen everything that the picture had to show me? Now that I recalled the scene in minutest detail, a vague impression forced itself upon me that "Pompadour" had said something to my friend of the fur coat just as the latter left him to go aboard the steamer. I remembered that "Pompadour's" face had been turned full to the camera, and I had certainly noticed his lips moving. What a pity that the cinematograph could not combine the records of sound and of spoken words with its marvellous reproductions of life and motion. How immensely the perfected appliance of the phonograph would add to the interest of even the ordinary, matter-of-fact cinematographic picture. The rattle of the approaching train, the roar of the green water rushing into Niagara's abyss, the laughter of children at play—the possibilities are endless. Fascinating dream; for both kinetoscope and phonograph must still be rated as toys, imperfect and undeveloped.

I had stepped in at the club after my visit to the *Planet* office, and it was time to start for my train if I intended to keep my engagement in Lauriston that evening—nothing less than the annual meeting of the Marion County Golf Club. And yet I suddenly decided that I would dine in town and perhaps spend the evening at the theatre. After all, the club meeting was of no particular importance, and they could get their quorum without me. I would stay, and I did.

It was perhaps unavoidable that on my way to the theatre I should have to pass by Vincent's, and with half an hour to spare there could be no harm in dropping in to satisfy myself about that crumb of conversation between my two suspects. In all probability I should be left as much in the dark as ever, but there was a chance that I might run across some morsel of fresh food for speculation. It was an unhealthy kind of diet that I craved, but such are among the consequences that follow upon the eating of forbidden fruit. I hesitated for perhaps half a minute, and then found my way into the familiar concert-hall.

With a keen sense of disappointment, I realized that the record of the phonograph would have been useless to me, even if one had been made. "Pompadour" had indeed said something to "Fur Coat" as the latter passed him, but the words had been spoken in a whisper; that was plain enough from the expression of their faces and the constraint of their attitudes. A dozen of Mr. Edison's machines might have been clicking away within a dozen feet, and not one of them would have caught a single word. It must be remembered too that the noise and confusion attending the departure of the steamer would have rendered even ordinary conversation inaudible. The secret would have been safe had I in person been standing on Dover pier that gloomy March afternoon. Too bad! but I must give up the problem; it has become impossible.

"Nothing is impossible, since the first Napoleon was good enough to erase the word from the dictionaries."

It was Murchison who had answered my inaudible confession of checkmate; he must have entered the hall some time before and quietly slipped into the vacant chair at my side.

I am very fond of Murchison, for he was a classmate of mine at college and a good fellow in every way. It was an odd sort of business into which he drifted after leaving "Old Nassau." He plays the organ at a deaf-and-dumb asylum—could anything be more ridiculous? But, then, he is an assistant-master in the institution, and the organ-playing is merely incidental to the daily religious services. There are a number of normally constituted people on the asylum staff who can appreciate his skill, and Murchison tells me that the unfortunate children themselves derive an evident though incomprehensible pleasure from the music that they cannot hear.

Murchison takes an intense interest in his profession, which is quite as it should be, and he has become proficient in all its technical details. To the lay mind it seems incredible that these afflicted children can be taught to articulate intelligibly without ever having heard a spoken word. But the miracle is, in fact, accomplished, and the old deaf-and-dumb finger alphabet holds but a secondary place in the modern system. The deaf mutes learn to articulate, mechanically, the inflections of the human voice, and they are also able to understand what another person is saying by reading the motions of the lips. Each phonetic syllable has its corresponding visible symbol, and with practice one may distinguish them all with absolute certainty. It is this last that seems so wonderful to me; but Murchison declares that the "reading" is a small thing compared to the acquirement of the mechanically produced articulation. As he once remarked when we were discussing the subject: "Any one can pick up lip-reading; I find myself doing it constantly, even when talking with normally constituted people like yourself. Where you, in earnest conversation with a friend, fix your attention upon his eyes, I look at his lips. It keeps me in practice, and, anyway, it has come to be a habit."

This little lecture of Murchison's comes to my mind as I turn to greet him. If lip-reading is really so easy, why should he not be able to interpret for me the whispered secrets of "Fur Coat" and "Pompadour"? I could put it to him as a test of skill, and without betraying my especial interest in the solution of the mystery.

I did put the problem to Murchison, and, as I had expected, he was immediately interested by the suggestion. It was a challenge to his professional skill, and he would succeed if any one could.

And yet the experiment was an utter failure; Murchison was not able to distinguish a single syllable. He ascribed his non-success to the constant flickering of the picture. The clock-work mechanism of the cinematograph is far from perfect, and the pulsing light distorts and destroys the delicate continuity of action upon which everything depends. We tried it again upon the third and final exhibition of the pictures, but again we failed.

And then I had another inspiration. Perhaps the film itself may show what is lost in the illuminated enlargement upon the screen. The people at Vincent's have come to look upon me as a regular patron of their establishment, and I found no difficulty in getting permission to inspect the celluloid roll that contained the scene on Dover pier.

Murchison and I examined the roll together, and found it to be a long strip of celluloid film containing some three thousand tiny photographs. The pictures were hardly half an inch square, and the prospect of getting anything definite was not encouraging.

"A magnifying glass," suggested Murchison, and the idea seemed worth trying.

A large reading-glass was procured, and we set to work, confining our attention, of course, to that portion of the film upon which "Pompadour's" whispered remark had been recorded.

"I seem to get something," said Murchison, after several minutes of close study, "but it's rank gibberish, after all. Just listen: 'May—song—shone—ruder—on'—what on earth can that mean? I'm not certain, either, that I have read all the symbols correctly—they certainly don't make sense. 'Song of May'—'May song,' or it may be something about a mason—I give it up."

"Hold on, Murchison. Just repeat the syllables as you read them without trying to form them into words. Don't think of what they ought to mean—the sound itself is what I want. That's it—'May—songh—zhone'— Stop! 'Maison jaune,' or the yellow house. It isn't English at all, Murchison, it's French! No wonder that you couldn't make it out. 'The yellow house,' and the rest is easy enough, for your 'ruder on' plainly refers to its situation — Rue de Rennes. And the whole sentence is simply, '(The) yellow house (in) the Rue de Rennes.'"

Murchison received my compliments upon his skill with becoming modesty, but refused my invitation to share a Welsh rabbit over at the Studio. He had another engagement, and I was obliged to eat my supper alone. I improved the opportunity by setting down in order the results of my investigations.

Imprimis: A crime has been committed upon March 25th of this present year (1899), the scene, being the Dover pier of the mail route between England and France, and the principal actors, a well-dressed man, of say five-and-twenty, and a middle-aged man of soldierly appearance, who wears his hair *à la pompadour.* The victim is an elderly gentleman, and one-armed, the left being the missing member. The object taken from his despatch-box cannot be described, except to say that it is about the size of a lemon. The appointed rendezvous of the thieves is a house known as the "yellow one," and situated on the Rue de Rennes. The latter is a well-known street in Paris, and belongs to the *rive gauche*, if I remember correctly. And that is all.

Step by step and already the next one is before me. The waiter had offered me a copy of the *Herald* with which to amuse myself while my order was being filled. An item in the personal column caught my eye:

"A package of valuable papers—liberal reward—no questions asked."

Precisely! Here is the echo of an occurrence not unlike to the one in which I am interested. Why should not my old gentleman have advertised his loss? If he did, there is but one medium for him, the "Agony Column" of the London *Times.*

I pay for my supper without waiting to eat it, and in half an hour I am again at the *Planet* office. The files of the "Thunderer" are placed before me, and I begin my search. Half-way down the column in the issue of April 1st is the following:

"LOST: On Saturday the twenty-fifth ult., on the landing-stage at Dover, and just before the departure of the mail-boat, a small parcel enclosed in a chamois-leather bag. The finder is requested to communicate, in strict confidence, with Mr. Smith, Numéro dix-huit, Rue d'Alger, Paris."

CHAPTER III

THE TOSS OF A COIN

A DOZEN times I have read and reread "Mr. Smith's" advertisement in the *Times*, and I am still undecided as to my proper course in the matter. I am positive that the "personal" refers to my affair, and while I cannot absolutely identify the "small parcel enclosed in a chamois-leather bag," I am morally confident that it is the article which I saw purloined by "M. le Fur Coat" and handed over to the keeping of "M. Pompadour." The word "lost," by-the-way, means nothing; the expression is the natural one which would be employed under the circumstances of the packet's disappearance. It is more than probable that the old gentleman has harbored no suspicion of foul play, and least of all towards the thief himself. They are friends, and the very thought would be impossible.

And so the article has been advertised as lost, and lost it is indeed. I myself know nothing more than that it was immediately conveyed into the confederate's keeping and an appointment made for a future meeting. Supposing that I communicated by letter with "Mr. Smith," would I be justified in making so serious a charge against the honor of his friend, unless, indeed, I could adduce some kind of corroboratory evidence? I might tell the simple story of what I had discovered in the cinematographic picture, but could I make the story so clear in detail that the reader would see with my eyes? And, finally, would "Mr. Smith" be willing, in so serious a matter, to accept anything but the evidence of his own senses? My unsupported romance would be instantly discredited, my impertinent communication would be deservedly ignored. I will drop the thing once and for all.

Thursday, June 14th.—For two days I have been trying to put this wretched business out of mind, but it is impossible; the feeling grows stronger and stronger that I ought to do something. There is more than mere vulgar pocket-picking in this affair —of that I am certain—and as an honest man I cannot stand idly aloof. The innocent may be suffering through my silence. She—but there! my thoughts are always running back to the woman, and I had determined that my interest in the matter should be strictly impersonal. And yet, after all, the first link in the chain was that fleeting glance at a girl's face. Had she not looked back at that one moment, I should have seen nothing more in the picture than what was revealed to the ordinary spectator. Moreover, having seen it once, I should have consulted my watch again and caught my train for Lauriston.

But what avail to talk of "ifs"? The fact remains that she did look back, and so all the rest follows. The drama whose prologue was acted out upon the pier at Dover has already included me in its list of characters, and, speaking part or walking gentleman, as the case may be, I have no choice but to respond to the summons of the prompter's bell. I have an odd consciousness that my fellow-actors are even now waiting for my appearance, so that the curtain may be rung up for Act the first.

It is an idea—worth attempting, at any rate. If I could secure from Vincent's the celluloid film of that particular picture, I might forward it to "Mr. Smith" as evidence of good faith in my written story. He could draw his own conclusions, and I should have no further responsibility in the matter. And I should have done my duty. I will try it.

The people at Vincent's were most polite, but they absolutely declined to part with any of their cinematographic rolls. Perhaps they have a price, but it is evidently beyond the resources of my check-book, and of course I cannot give the true explanation of what must appear to be a preposterous whim. The manager, however, suggests that the London office of the company keep all the duplicate films in stock, and they may be willing to treat with me if assured that I was not a business rival. Their address was 31 Grace Court, Temple Avenue, East City, The Consolidated Amusement Company, Ltd.

Friday, June 15th.—If I send a letter by the Saturday mail-steamer it will take fully three weeks for the answer to come back to me. Even assuming that the reply is favorable, and I secure the coveted film, it will mean a further delay of ten days before I can count upon its being delivered to "Mr. Smith" in Paris. It would be the latter part of July before I could look upon my duty as accomplished. What might not happen in those four or five weeks?

Well, I can make my disclosure in person by taking a flying trip across to London and Paris. I have been saving up my vacations now for a couple of years, and the chief will readily grant me leave of absence for four weeks. If I go myself I can probably make a better bargain with the London people, and, indeed, it is doubtful if anything but a personal interview will assure success in the negotiations. With the precious film once in my possession, I can run over to Paris, deliver my message and evidence to "Mr. Smith," and be quit of any further responsibility in the matter. That will leave me nearly a week for sight-seeing; and, as I have never been abroad, the trip should be a pleasant one. The *Etruria* sails to-morrow at ten o'clock. The passenger-list is probably full up, but I can squeeze in somewhere—there is always a somebody who fails at the last moment to claim his berth.

On the other hand, Murchison and I had been planning a golfing pilgrimage among the various Eastern clubs, and only this morning he had telephoned me that all the arrangements had been made and that I should meet him at the Grand Central Station on Monday morning in time for the ten-o'clock express. It would be too bad to disappoint him and myself as well, and, really, I am under no sort of obligation to test this extremely doubtful hypothesis at the expense of my personal convenience and rather slender bank account. It is more than probable that the incident of two months back has been closed long ago, and I should be a fool to attempt reopening it. I ought to take the common-sense business-like view of the situation, and its romantic possibilities should have no weight whatever in my decision. Nicholas Cary must be sensible and remember that the pot of gold at the foot of the rainbow arch is farther away than it looks. If I write to the Consolidated Amusement Company in London, and try to strike a bargain with them, I shall have done all that can reasonably be expected of me. This is certainly the common-sense, the business-like view of the situation.

Fortified with this praiseworthy determination, I telegraph to Murchison that I will be on hand Monday, and apply myself with renewed energy to my work.

And then, twenty minutes afterwards, I pull out my lucky half-dollar and study it attentively. It is simply impossible for me to attempt to settle such a question by the light of pure reason. Since it is all a matter of blind chance, let chance itself give the decision. Heads, London; tails, the Grand Central Station.

The coin spun in the air and fell—tails up. But in falling to the floor it had struck upon its edge in a crack; the toss was unfair, and should not count. Again it was tossed, and again tails showed up. Well, twice out of three times is the infallible test. Fortune must be permitted to show her mind unmistakably.

Once more, then, and for the third time it is tails. It is a pure waste of time to coquette longer with Fate; the jade is plainly out of sorts and not amenable to reason.

At the Cunard office I am informed that an upper inside berth is at my disposal. A small deposit will secure it, and I have until ten o'clock to-morrow morning to come to a final decision with my vacillating inner man.

Saturday, *June 16th.*—It is high noon, and the *Etruria* is steaming abreast of the Scotland lightship and plunging her sharp bow into the yeasty tumble of a "sou'easter." I recollect, with some annoyance, that my hasty note of explanation to Murchison is still safely buttoned up in an inside pocket; and the pilot went over the side not ten minutes ago. It is too bad; what will Murchison think of me?

CHAPTER IV

“MR. SMITH” CHEZ LUI

TO-DAY is Tuesday the 26th of June, and, having left London at nine o'clock by the day express, we are due in Paris at five. Through the windows of the second-class carriage I can see that the country is rapidly taking on the familiar features that characterize the suburbs of great cites; in half an hour I shall be in the French capital.

So far, so good, for I had been able to make a satisfactory bargain with The Consolidated Amusement Company of London, and the interesting roll of celluloid film is safely stowed away in my Gladstone bag. Now that I have my evidence, I feel certain that my business with “Mr. Smith” will be quickly despatched. I shall tell my story as simply as I can, and then produce the cinematographic roll as ocular demonstration of my good faith. “Mr. Smith” can believe or not as he pleases, but he can hardly doubt the sincerity of my friendly offices, and he should be properly grateful for them. He may even invite me to stay to dinner, but I shall refuse; my services up to this point have been so purely disinterested that it would be a pity to color them even by a shade of self-seeking. Having placed “Mr. Smith” under a crushing sense of obligation, I shall bow and retire. A couple of days in which to glance at Paris, and then to Scotland and St. Andrews, always remembering that I must be at Liverpool by Saturday, July 7th, in time to claim my berth on the *Lucania*, sailing for New York that afternoon. Otherwise I cannot get back within the limits of my four weeks' vacation, and the work will be piling up steadily on my desk. And the chief is a particular person.

Speaking of vacations brings up the shameful remembrance that I have still neglected to write to Murchison; in decency I ought to send him a cable. But apologies at twenty-five cents a word are an expensive luxury, and I shall be back in New York almost as soon as a letter can reach him. After all, Murchison is a good fellow, and he will forgive me for keeping him waiting for so long at the Grand Central Station. Now that I think of it, there is literally nobody who is acquainted with my present whereabouts. I did not think it necessary to make a confidant of any one at the office, and I have no immediate family, with the exception of a married sister, who happens to be travelling in California. I have simply dropped out of sight for three or four weeks, and it will be time enough to explain when I choose to reappear. So long as I am at my desk by Monday, July 16th, it is nobody's business where I am or what I may be doing. But, of course, I do owe Murchison an apology, and it shall be a handsome one—the best travelling-bag that money can buy in London.

More brick and mortar, and finally an interminable railway yard shut in by lofty buildings. The train slackens speed, and sways in and out over innumerable points; the guards fling open the doors of the carriages, and a uniformed porter appears at the step. We have arrived—this is the Gare du Nord, and Paris.

I installed myself at a small hotel not far away from the fashionable quarter, and having hastily removed the obvious stains of travel, I looked at my watch and considered. It was half after six, and the Rue d'Alger was but a few minutes' walk. Would it not be wise to stroll down there immediately and endeavor to see "Mr. Smith," or at least arrange for an interview to-morrow? The sooner the business is over with the better, and at this hour of the day I should be pretty sure of finding him at home. Yes; I will go.

I have decided that it will be imprudent to take along the cinematographic record upon this my preliminary visit to "Mr. Smith" *chez lui.* The Rue d'Alger is a quiet street, running from the Rivoli to the Rue St.-Honoré, and it is more than likely that my "Mr. Smith" is a member of the most respectable society. For all that my mission is a delicate one, and it will be only discreet to know with whom I have to deal. If this preliminary interview is satisfactory, nothing can be easier than to arrange for a subsequent meeting, when I can acquit myself of my self-imposed trust by placing the evidence in the proper hands. I hardly like, however, to leave the precious record at my room, nor do I care to commit it to the keeping of mine host of the Hotel Marengo. A better plan will be to step in at the office of the New York *Herald* and ask to have the little parcel put in the safe and kept until I can call for it.

The clerk at the *Herald* office was quite willing to oblige a fellow-countryman in so trifling a request, and I made my way to the Rue d'Alger with a lightened heart.

As I had expected, number *dix-huit* turned out to be a small hotel, but it is certainly all that can be desired in the matter of appointments. It is presumably affected by wealthy people of quiet tastes, who give it a regular and profitable patronage, and the proprietor is not obliged to worry himself over the coming and going of tourist and transient custom. It corresponds to what in New York is known as the family hotel, and for the well-to-do it solves the problem of city residence very pleasantly.

I entered and inquired if a gentleman by the name of Smith was among the guests of the house. The good-looking young woman in the tiny office shook her head, doubtfully.

"Perhaps, then, 'Mister Smith.'" I made this amendment with some hesitation, but the effect was immediate.

"Mistaire Smeeth! Ah, yes; I remember now. You wish to see him?"

I offered my card, upon which I had scribbled a few words explaining that I had called in reference to an advertisement in the London *Times*. With some difficulty a servant was finally summoned and commissioned to deliver my message, and mademoiselle was good enough to provide me with a chair while I waited.

Ridiculous as it may seem, I am feeling just a trifle on edge. Is the game about to begin at last? Hitherto my role has been that of the solitaire player; am I now to be invited to take a seat at the table, or have the tricks been long ago played out and counted up? Well, I shall soon know; there comes the man at last.

"Will m'sieu be good enough to follow." "Mr. Smith's" apartments are *au premier*, and comprise an extensive suite with a private hallway. I am received at the private door by a lackey and ushered into a room fitted up as a library. But I have hardly time to glance about me before a door at the farther end opens and an elderly gentleman enters. I rise, bow, and for a moment or two we face each other in silence. It is the salute, the preliminary courteous to the actual assault.

In one thing I have the advantage, for I identify "Mr. Smith" without hesitation. The thin face with white mustache and imperial, the keen eyes with their heavy brows, the missing left arm; it is he without a doubt, the old man of the little drama on Dover pier. But it is not my place to speak.

"Mr. Nicholas Cary—of London, may I ask?" This in excellent English.

"No; of New York."

"Ah, yes; an American. It is always a pleasure to meet a citizen of the Great Republic. You—ahem—have called—"

I take from my pocket-book my copy of the *Times* advertisement and hand it over. "Am I addressing Mr. Smith?"

"You may assume that I am acting for him. But pray be seated."

"Mr. Smith" adjusts his *pince-nez*, and reads the slip of paper with great attention. But I can see that he is taking the opportunity of studying me as well. He looks up suddenly.

"What is your interest in this affair, Mr.—er—Cary?"

"Merely that of a stranger who desires to render a service. As a matter of fact, I know but little, and that indirectly, of the transaction."

"Transaction! Hum! That is a curious term to apply in this connection. It is a simple *loss* of which this advertisement speaks."

"As you please," I answer, indifferently. "The incident, then, occurred on March 25th, the scene being the Dover pier of the mail route between London and Paris. You were a passenger, and just before the steamer sailed you lost a small packet from your despatch-box."

"Ah, it was *before* the departure of the boat—that is very interesting."

The old gentleman is assuredly an expert in the art of extracting useful information, but this is not the time to show my hand. I owe it to myself to go no further until I can back up what I have to say by the evidence of the photographic record. And so I explain rather lamely that I am ready at some subsequent interview to give all the information that I may possess on the subject. At any hour, then, in the morning that may be convenient to "Mr. Smith."

"You were an eye-witness of the—er—incident?" continues my inquisitor, with imperturbable serenity.

"No; and, in another sense, yes." I make this ambiguous statement with an embarrassing sense of its inadequacy, but what am I to do? I can't explain myself without telling the whole story, and when I do that I want the proof at hand. I half rise; I am anxious now to get away.

"Mr. Smith" put out his hand with a gesture that somehow compelled obedience, and I sank back into my chair.

"Of course, Mr. Cary, you are acquainted with the contents of this package?"

"No." I made the assertion confidently, as I had the right to do.

"You surprise me. You do not know, then, that the 'small parcel enclosed in a chamois-leather bag' contained the 'Cardinal's Rose'?"

"The 'Cardinal's Rose'?"

"Precisely. The great ruby belonging to the crown jewels of Ætolia. It is the finest ruby in the world, and familiar to all connoisseurs in precious stones."

I explained that my acquaintance with the subject was very limited. A working newspaper man, on $1800 a year, can have but little occasion to deal in such luxuries as crown jewels. And as for this particular "Cardinal's Rose," I had never even heard of it.

"Mr. Smith" listened with an amused smile. "Then you are equally ignorant of its value?" he inquired, abruptly.

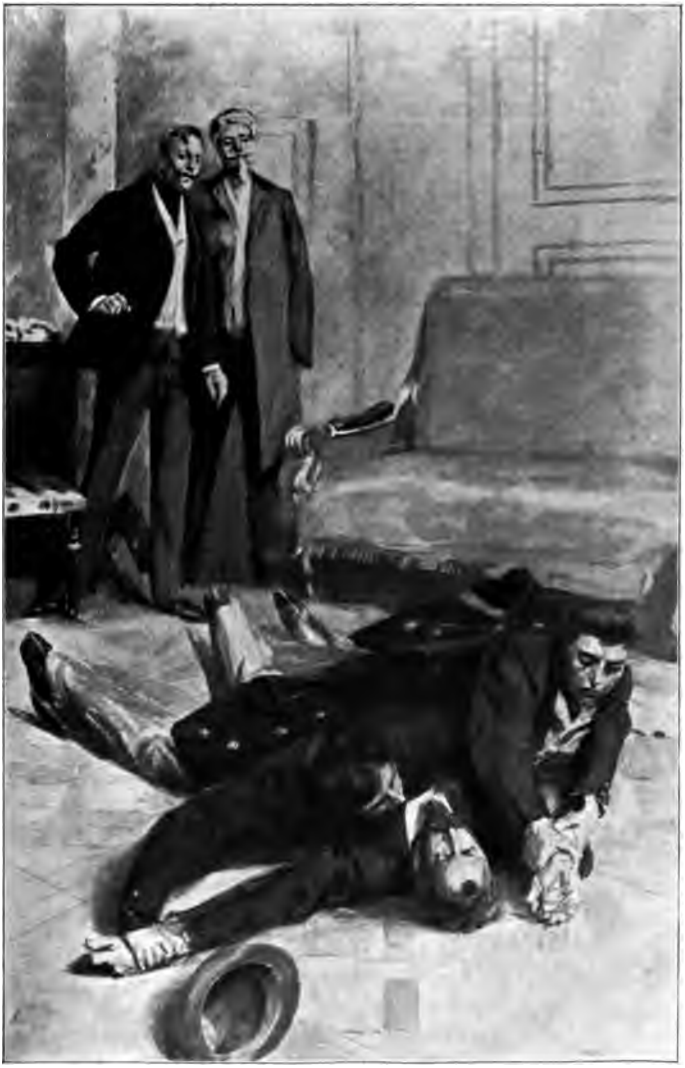
"Absolutely so."

"The Rajah of Buddapore sold it to his Majesty Basil I. for a sum equivalent to a million of your dollars. But that was far below its real value, and it was only because the Rajah had to have the money that he sold it at all. It may be worth four or five times that amount, but, of course, a jewel like this is not quoted in the open market—it is not supposed to get there," he added, significantly.

Well, but this was a larger business than I had bargained for, and I instantly recognized that my position was a delicate one. Persons who pretend to know something about the disappearance of portable property that is valued in the millions ought to keep their credentials at hand. As it was, I had absolutely nothing to show that I was really Nicholas Cary, sub-editor of the *New World* Review, and a reputable citizen of Greater New York. I had neither passport nor letter of credit, and there was no one at the American Embassy who knew me. Only by cabling could I establish my identity, and in the mean time "Mr. Smith" was waiting for his explanation.

There was but one thing to do. I would tell the story just as it was, and then ask "Mr. Smith" to accompany me to the *Herald* office for the proof. I looked up and met his eye squarely.

"I am willing to tell what I know of the affair," I said, as quietly as I could.



"DOWN TOGETHER IN ONE MIGHTY CRASH"

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TILDEN FOUNDATIONS
R L

"Mr. Smith" smiled, and begged that I would begin at once. But before I could do so, a door opened and a third person entered the room. "Mr. Smith" turned, impatiently, and then rose and advanced rapidly towards the new-comer. A few words passed between them in an undertone. Evidently they were on the closest terms of intimacy, and I myself had some title to look upon the gentleman as an old acquaintance, none other than "Fur Coat" in person. Here was a pretty coil indeed! But I took my resolution quickly.

"Mr. Nicholas Cary, of New York," explained "Mr. Smith," with a polite inclination in my direction. And then in French: "You speak French, do you not? My friend understands little or no English."

I bowed. "Yes; but my communication was to be absolutely confidential."

"Precisely, my dear Mr. Cary; but when I inform you that this gentleman is the Chevalier du Midi, you will perceive that he is fully entitled with myself to any information that you may feel inclined to give."

Now I have not the slightest idea of who the Chevalier du Midi may be, but I do know that he is the last person in the world who should hear what I have to say. Of what use to make an open accusation, even though the photographic record might be adduced to prove my charge? The prime object, as I viewed it, was the recovery of the "Cardinal's Rose," and if the net is to be spread in the direct sight of the bird, we should assuredly go home empty-handed.

The only chance is to persist in my refusal to tell nothing except to "Mr. Smith" alone. But I am afraid that it will be difficult to persuade him that I am the better judge of what is vital to his interests.

No matter; I will put a bold face upon the issue thus joined.

"I must decline to speak except in private," I answered, steadily.

The General, as the young man has once or twice addressed him, frowned, and then beckoned to the embrasure of a window in the far corner of the room, where they continued for some minutes talking earnestly.

Oddly enough, I rather like the face of this young Chevalier du Midi, now that I see it in the flesh He was to have been the villain in my melodrama, but he is not at all the sort of person that I should have cast for the part. Tall and slight, there is just the suggestion of weakness in the lines around the mouth and in the indecisively moulded chin. But a thief! a traitor! the thought is impossible. The General turned around.

"Once more, Mr. Cary, I must ask you to proceed with what you have to say."

There is the thin edge of a threat in the tones of his voice, and it irritates me. I can be stubborn, too, and I am not here to see justice thwarted so egregiously.

"Impossible, General. I will speak to you in private—or not at all." I rise, and look for my hat and stick; the situation has become intolerable.

"But, my dear sir, I cannot permit you to leave until you have complied with my very reasonable request."

"I shall be in Paris until Thursday; I will give you my address."

"I should much prefer your company, my dear Mr. Cary, and—well, if you must have it—I shall insist."

There is menace, open and unmistakable, in these last words. I measure my distance to the door—one hasty stride—

Two stout fellows in livery have suddenly presented themselves from an inner apartment and are barring my way to liberty. But my blood is up now, and I lead savagely with my left at the nearest of the flunkies. The blow catches him squarely on the point of the chin, and he is flat aback against the wall. Had he gone down, I might have had a chance, but before I can turn to deal with Number Two, they are both upon me. Straining and tripping, the three of us thrash backward into the centre of the room. I catch one glimpse of a woman's startled face, framed in an adjacent doorway, and then we go down together in one mighty crash. My head strikes against something sharp and hard, and the rest is darkness.

CHAPTER V

THE SPIDER'S PARLOR

WHEN I awoke, I found myself comfortably stowed away in bed, and for some minutes I lay staring up at the ceiling, trying to piece things together again, as though my mind were some sort of dissected map puzzle. Then I remembered, and on putting my hand to my head I found it carefully swathed about with bandages. It felt rather sore, but I was sure that no material damage had been done; it had been an extra hard knock, that was all. Somebody had struck me, or I had fallen—ah, now it all comes back, the struggle, and my ignominious defeat. It was plain that I had not succeeded in getting clear. I must be even now enjoying the enforced hospitality of the persistent " Mr. Smith."

The room itself was in semi-darkness, but there was a gleam of yellow light bordering the heavy window-curtains. The sun was shining outside; could it be possible that the night had passed? My watch was lying upon a stand set at the head of the bed. I looked at it and saw that it was a little after eight o'clock. Surely I had not been unconscious all this time from the effects of a blow received at seven o'clock the night before. I must have slept, and soundly, too, for twelve hours at least. It was very odd; perhaps some opiate had been administered to keep me quiet. The thought startled me, and I determined to push my investigations a little further.

I felt a trifle giddy as I sat up and swung my feet to the floor, but the weakness quickly passed. I walked over to the window, pulled aside the curtains, and looked about me.

The street was certainly the Rue d'Alger. I remembered distinctly the house across the way, with its beautiful iron grill-work. It was a lovely morning, and never had the air tasted sweeter; I threw the casement wide open and drank it down greedily. Then I turned to contemplate my immediate environment.

The room was rather small, but handsomely appointed in every way, and every possible provision had been made for my comfort. There were my clothes, neatly pressed and folded; "Mr. Smith's" valet was certainly a competent person. "Curious! but there is something familiar in the look of that portmanteau—yes, it is my own, and there is my sole-leather steamer trunk. How on earth did they get here from the Hotel Marengo? Does 'Mr. Smith' intend that I shall make his apartments my permanent headquarters? It is very good of him, but"—I walked over to the door and felt it all over, for it must be that my eyes had tricked me. But, no; they were right, there was not the vestige of a knob, on this side at least. The door in the opposite wall appeared to be in normal working order, but it led only to a large closet.

Really, now, but this was quite too absurd. Whoever this "General"—this "Mr. Smith" might be, he could not seriously contemplate the idea of interfering with my personal liberty, and that, too, in the very heart of civilized Paris. This was not the fourteenth century, but the nineteenth, and this exclusive family hotel, just off the crowded Rue de Rivoli, was neither a fortalice in the Apennines, nor a palace on the Bosporus. The whole thing was too ridiculous!

I tried the knobless door, but there was no possible way of opening it from the inside. I knocked gently, and then furiously, but there was no response. Ah, there is the bell-pull! I will try that.

I heard footsteps and the turning of a key, and just managed to get back into bed as a servant entered, carrying a coffee-tray. I recognized in the fellow one of my adversaries of the night before. He had a big piece of black plaster on his chin, and there was the semblance of a grin lurking at the corners of his mouth as he advanced to the bedside and respectfully wished me a good-morning.

"Well?" I said, impatiently.

"The General presents his compliments, and desires the pleasure of Mr. Cary's company in the library at his earliest convenience. How will m'sieu have his bath?"

Plainly there was nothing else to be done, and I should not get very far upon any road if I stuck to my high horse. Vital proved himself an excellent valet, and the transfer of a five-franc piece quickly obliterated the unpleasant recollections of our first meeting, and placed us on the best of terms. For all that he was a singularly uncommunicative person, and although I tried hard to pump him, I got but little for my pains. The General was M. le Comte Czareska, temporarily residing in Paris, and the household comprised his daughter, Mlle. Irma, Mme. Verriker, an English lady and companion to mademoiselle, and M. le Chevalier du Midi, whom I had already met. Well, this told me nothing, and it was plain that I must look to the General for an explanation, if, indeed, he proposed giving me even that much by way of satisfaction.

I took the precaution, after dismissing the man, to see that my money and papers were intact. Nothing was missing; my gold and notes footed up to the last sou, and my solitary piece of jewelry, a heart-shaped pearl pin, was sticking in my Ascot scarf. My watch, my cigarette case, my keys—ah, where are my keys? I always carry them in my left waistcoat-pocket. I found them at last in a coat-pocket, and as I am very methodical in such trifles, this change of location leads to but one conclusion—my clothing and trunks must have been searched while I was unconscious. The bare thought makes me furious, but it is ten o'clock, and the General is awaiting me. So much the better; he shall answer personally to me for this unforgivable affront.

Vital appeared at the door, in response to my ring, and indicated that I was to follow him. I found the General in the library, where I had been received the night before. He advanced to meet me, but I cut short his polite inquiries as to my health by abruptly demanding the reason for my extraordinary treatment.

"I must leave this place immediately," I concluded, staring hard at him.

The General took my ultimatum most affably, but a graven image could not have been more unyielding.

"You forget, Mr. Cary, that you were to give me a certain piece of information."

"And you insisted," I retorted, "upon the admission of a third person to what was to be a strictly private conference."

"At the time—yes. Perhaps I was wrong, and at any rate that difficulty does not present itself at present. We are alone, and we shall not be interrupted."

This made me angry, but I tried to speak coolly: "Under the circumstances I shall refuse to say anything. I came here to render you a service, and you have taken an unjustifiable advantage of my confidence in your honor. Until I receive an apology, and am assured of entire liberty of action, I must remain silent."

"As to the apology, Mr. Cary, it shall be as ample as you can possibly desire. It is an unpleasant necessity which has compelled me to act as I have done, and I regret it heartily. But as to your second condition, we may as well understand each other. I shall be obliged to consider you as my guest until you see fit to answer my questions."

For the moment I am dumfounded by this audacious ultimatum. It is incredible; I cannot believe that the man is serious. And then I take another look at that calmly smiling face, and I realize that I have to do with a will that stops at nothing to attain its ends. The General means what he says; I am a prisoner, and under a duress as real as though these velvet hangings and gorgeous tapestries were the stone walls of a mediæval dungeon. For one instant I feel a wild desire to meet the outrage with physical resistance. The General is an old man, the people in the street, the other guests in the hotel—it is impossible that assistance can be absolutely cut off. Let him bring on his flunkies if he will; I'll engage that the row shall reach the ears of every gendarme within a dozen blocks. Then I grow cool again. I see that in this room also the knobs have been removed from all the doors opening out into the corridor and private halls. I shall merely be exposing myself to another humiliating contest with menials, and to the consequent loss of whatever personal dignity I may still possess. I must deal with this madman in another way.

"You are aware, General Czareska, that in forcibly detaining me you are laying yourself open to serious consequences?"

"Perfectly, sir; but I am prepared to encounter them."

"I am an American citizen, and one word to the Ambassador of the United States—"

"Precisely; but that word will not be spoken."

Well, really, but the effrontery is so exquisite that I cannot help smiling. The General seizes the opening.

"My dear Mr. Cary, let us be open with each other. It is plain that you possess some information relative to the—er—disappearance of the 'Cardinal's Rose,' and the recovery of the jewel has for me an importance that is totally incommensurate with its intrinsic value, large as that may be. You are a gentleman, and I will not do you the discourtesy of asking the price of your secret. I am certain that no stigma attaches to you, whatever may have been your part in the matter; but I tell you frankly that we shall not be quit of each other until I know the truth."

"And I say to you, M. le Général, that the restoration of my self-respect—in other words, my liberty, is the sole condition upon which I will consent to open my mouth."

"When an irresistible force encounters an immovable body," returns my opponent, with entire good-humor, "the only thing left is to go in to breakfast."

He hesitated a moment, and then went on: "Of course, you can be served in your own room, if you prefer; but since our association is likely to be prolonged indefinitely, you may find it pleasanter to accept a seat at my table."

As I am very hungry, and shall spite no one but myself by refusing, I bow my acknowledgments, and we enter an adjoining apartment where the *dé-*

jeuner à la fourchette is being served, and the General gives me the honor of a presentation to Mrs. Verriker, who is already seated. She is unmistakably British in appearance, but still a fine-looking woman. I instinctively dislike her, but I don't trouble myself to find a reason; I have mentally classed her with the celebrated Doctor Fell, and that is reason enough. Curious eyes she has; they seem to be everywhere in general and nowhere in particular. I can feel that she is studying me, even though her attention is apparently bestowed upon the contents of her soup-plate. The Chevalier is not present, and Mlle. Czareska only appears after we have been seated for a few minutes.

It is indeed the girl of Dover pier, like and yet how unlike. That first picture is still always present to my mind—the slender, swaying form, the troubled, wistful face. Quite another person is this tailor-made young woman who sweeps me over with an indifferent glance, and then applies herself to lorgnette and letters. I think grimly that I am likely to have plenty of time in which to improve the acquaintance.

The meal is hardly a success from the social point of view. The General is amiably talkative, but Mrs. Verriker speaks only in monosyllables, and mademoiselle is openly and haughtily indifferent to us all. As for me, my head is aching again, and I am feeling blue and out of sorts. It is a relief to get back into the library, where I find the newspapers at my service, including the Paris edition of the *Herald*, out of compliment to my national predilections. After a few moments the General excuses himself, and leaves me to the resources of literature and a box of Reina Victorias. Excellent cigars they are, too; and yet I should prefer one of those horrible Parisian cigarettes and the liberty of the Boulevard des Capucines.

Now I am not so childish as to make any overt attempt at escaping from my gilded cage. Even if I could succeed in breaking down one of the knobless doors, I should assuredly have to deal with Vital and Achille, and unquestionably they have their orders. It is also certain that the people of the hotel are entirely subservient to the wishes of my self-appointed host. If he chooses to keep a live hippopotamus in his apartments, it is entirely his own affair, and he is quite able to pay for his whim. Nobody is going to bother themselves over the misfortunes of an obscure American newspaper editor. Let him give his hostage to Fortune or take the consequences.

I fall to wondering how my enemies had discovered my whereabouts at the Hotel Marengo, and how old Beraud had been cajoled into the surrender of my luggage. But, then, money will do anything, even if not backed up by some mysterious influence whose existence is certain, even though I may not be able to analyze its source of power. I must take facts as I find them.

The thought occurs to me that I may possibly succeed in getting a message to Mr. Benton, our ambassador. If I can once gain his ear my troubles will soon be over. It is useless, any attempt at suborning the Czareska servants; they are incorruptible and devoted to their master's interest. But there is the chance of a letter addressed to the American ambassador and thrown at a venture into the street below. There are scores of casual passers-by, and, taking into account the simplicity of the service asked, and the importance of the missive as indicated by its address—really, the odds are all in my favor, and it will cost me nothing to accept them.

I write my letter and approach the half-open window. Nobody is in sight, so here goes my bid for liberty. It falls safely to the pavement, and I then experience the mortification of seeing it carefully picked up by Achille, who emerges, as though quite by accident, from the *conciergerie* of the house across the street. A few moments later he presents it to me upon a salver, with the respectful admonition that the throwing of papers into the street is forbidden under the municipal code. And so I betake myself again to the *Temps* and a fresh Havana. It is Kismet.

CHAPTER VI

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

IT is just ten days since I became General Czareska's guest, to use his own pleasant euphemism. To-morrow is Saturday, July 7th, and I should be at Liverpool, ready to go aboard the *Lucania*, the ship being scheduled to sail at ten o'clock in the morning. But I shall not be there, and in consequence I will not be able to report at my desk on Monday, July 16th. My chief of the *New World* Review will wonder at my delinquency, and then, after waiting upon me for a reasonable length of time, he will proceed to fill my place. This is what I get for meddling with other people's business. It is too bad, for it is none too easy to find a new berth nowadays; there are plenty of sub-editors in New York who are quite as competent as myself to read MSS. and proof for the *New World.*

I tried to explain this the other day to the General, but he only smiled, and assured me that matters lay entirely in my own hands. I had only to make my promised disclosure, and, no matter what its tenor, I should be free to depart, *foi de gentilhomme.*

Of course, I have refused to even consider such a proposition. I can be as inflexible as the next man, and my self-respect is the real issue. I will not be coerced into the performance of a service that I had undertaken out of pure good-will; I will not say a word until I am in a position to do so as one gentleman may to another. Here we stick, and I see no way out of the blind alley into which I have so recklessly plunged. We discuss the situation by the hour, and with the most amiable intentions, but we always leave off precisely where we began. The General is a perfect mule for obstinacy, and I will die now sooner than yield my point.

It may seem incredible that this strange captivity should exist outside of a dream, but, unfortunately, its reality is not to be questioned. I have absolutely no means of communication with the outside world. None of the ordinary hotels ervants ever enters our apartments ; we are served entirely by the General's own people, and they are incorruptible. Telepathy is a sealed science to me, and Vital or Achille are always at hand to intercept my material messages. I have been offered a certain amount of outside liberty upon the condition of giving my parole, but I do not choose to avail myself of the empty privilege.

Yesterday, however, to my astonishment, the General invited me to take a walk with him. I accepted, fully confident of my ability to bring the farce to an end. Once let me get into the open street and the terms will be even again, despite the presence of the two body-servants. The nearest gendarme will serve my turn, for no officer can refuse my request to be conducted to a prefecture for an examination, and I can then make my appeal to the American ambassador.

Well, as it turned out, we walked along, chatting pleasantly, until we came to the Place Vendôme. A *fiacre* was passing, and, before any one could interfere, I had hailed it, jumped in, and motioned to the driver to proceed. The man hesitated and asked where I wished to go. Imbecile! for Vital was already at the horse's head. But there was also a gendarme within a few paces, and I must make my stand now or never.

"To the American Embassy," I shouted; but Vital had the bridle in hand, and the fool of a *cocher* was too much astonished to know what to do. The gendarme hastened up and demanded the cause of the disturbance, while we all tried to talk at once. The General whispered something in the officer's ear, and tapped his own forehead in a significant manner. Of course, I understood; he was describing me as a patient of some private *maison de santé* out for an airing with my keepers, and in spite of my vexation, I could not help laughing at the neat way in which the old gentleman carried it off. An appeal was useless, and resistance equally so. Escorted by the representative of the law, we progressed solemnly back to *Numéro dix-huit*, and I had to find what consolation I could in spread-eagling the General at billiards, one hundred points up.

And yet, despite the occasional pressure of the steel hand within the velvet glove, my position is not an unpleasant one. The General and I are on excellent terms, especially since it has come out that during our civil war he served for a few months with my dear father, as a volunteer aid on McClellan's staff. He knew Major Cary quite well, and esteemed him highly. As the son of my father I am to command him in everything—that is, in all but one thing.

I have also become quite intimate with the young Chevalier du Midi. He has his own apartments in the hotel, but he dines with us almost every evening; and in the daytime we play billiards; he is also giving me fencing lessons. It is a fine exercise, and, under his tuition, I have already acquired a tolerable degree of proficiency. Upon my word, I do not know what to make of him. It is not easy to forget a certain thing, and yet—well, it is inexplicable!

Of the two ladies I have seen comparatively little. Mrs. Verriker is distantly polite, for she seems to resent my presence here. Can she know that it is involuntary on my part?

Mademoiselle I meet at dinner, and occasionally she so far unbends as to give us a little music in the evenings. She plays the harp beautifully, and sings strange little ballads in some extraordinary foreign tongue whose very name is unknown to me. And now and then we all have a round game at "race-course," with real printed cards of the various events, and accompanied by the most spirited of book-making. I won the big "Rue d'Alger" sweepstakes last night with my black filly, Vixen, and Mrs. Verriker honored my success with a look that was full of dagger-points.

Not once, though, had I caught even a glimpse of the real Irma de Czareska, if, indeed, she be the same woman who on a certain gray day in March turned her back on all the world and looked at me. I wonder if I shall ever know; and then, again, I say to myself that it is better as it is. When my time does come, it will be that much the easier to slip quietly away, and so be done with it all.

As for the rest, I dare say that I am fortunately placed. I am with charming people, who know how to live, and the feeling is a pleasant one after years of grinding at the office, and following upon an uninterrupted succession of dreary city and country boarding-houses. I have fallen into my lines with astonishing facility, and the romance is all the more alluring that it is spiced with mystery, perhaps with danger.

For two or three days I have seen hardly anything of either the General or of du Midi. They seem to have important business on hand, and receive many visitors, foreign-looking men, who gesticulate with much vehemence, and smoke vast quantities of Egyptian tobacco. Of course I am not invited to join their conferences, and the arrival of a visitor is the signal for my departure to the billiard-room.

Among these gentlemen (of fortune, perhaps) there is one man whom I have run across several times, and whose appearance interests me. I have learned that his name is Coventry—Mr. Giles Coventry, to be precise—and he is supposed to have some indefinite connection with the French Foreign Office. But, even apart from his name, I am sure that he is English. Mr. Coventry is a fine-looking man of five-and-forty, or thereabouts, and oddly enough I never see him without my mind harking back to "Monsieur Pompadour," of Dover pier. And yet the resemblance is so very general in character as to give me no ground for active speculation ; above all, it is lacking in the distinguishing mark of the hair dressed à la pompadour.

Mr. Coventry seems to be a great friend of the Chevalier's, and he has dined with us once or twice. Frankly, I like him, for there is an engaging dash and swagger about him that is taking enough. But now and then I fancy that he is putting it on ; last night at dinner he hardly said three words during as many courses. But he flashed out again when the champagne came on, and convulsed us with his accounts of "Golf as she is played" by the Anglo-maniacs of the Jockey Club.

Monday, July 9th.—The General made an extraordinary proposal to me to-day. It seems that there is to be a ball at the Russian Embassy, and Mlle. Czareska wishes to attend it. Of course, Mrs. Verriker will be on duty as a chaperon, but a male escort is also desirable, and both the General and du

Midi will be otherwise engaged—perhaps another one of those mysterious conferences. Possibly they will feel more at ease to know that I am unmistakably out of the way; at any rate, the General has asked me if I will oblige him by assuming his place at mademoiselle's side. I will have to give my parole, and it is a necessity that I dislike; in doing so I virtually admit the legitimacy of the duress under which I chafe.

For all that I have resolved to accept, and I shall not try to analyze my reasons too closely. Fortunately I have with me my evening clothes; I am not sure that I could submit to the horrors of a Parisian dress-coat, even for the pleasure of a *deux-temps* with Irma de Czareska.

The carriage was already in line at the embassy, when I remembered that, after all, the General had omitted to take my formal parole. I said as much to mademoiselle, and asked her to accept my assurance of good faith to cover the period of our absence. She inclined her head, without speaking, and a moment later we had passed the portals of his Excellency Baron Zapkoff.

I dare say that the ball was nothing out of the common, as such functions go in Paris, but to my eyes the spectacle was an enchanting one. Nowadays, we New-Yorkers yield to no one in the matter of wax candles and gold-leaf, but my fashionable horizon had been bounded, hitherto, by the heavy splendors of the red-room at old Delmonico's, and by the insipid prettiness of one or two private ball-rooms. Here was the real thing at last, a genuine echo of Paris the magnificent—these Russians, at least, still live to show us how the great world once moved.

But with my eyes once clear of the first dazzle, it was the people that interested me the most. The jewels, the uniforms, the crosses were but the accidents of wealth and of rank; the men and women who stood and moved about me, they were the embodiments of the social power itself. Mademoiselle was graciously pleased to point out several of the more exalted personages, and I am bound to say that I looked them over with a frank curiosity. But, then, that is the attitude always expected of a born democrat, as I explained to mademoiselle. She smiled:

"Let us go on into the world of finance. You see the little round man standing near our host; that is Baron Kerker."

Of course I knew all about Baron Kerker, money-lender to half Europe, a man who in the mere mass of his millions possesses the Archimedian lever that can move the world.

"I can admire him honestly enough," I said, smiling back at her. "His is a power that appeals to every true New-Yorker."

"Then study him attentively, Mr. Cary; the knowledge may prove useful."

Mademoiselle went off for a turn on the floor with a young English diplomatic sprig, and I was obliged to pay some perfunctory attentions to Mrs. Verriker. As usual, we did not get on at all, and I was more than relieved when mademoiselle returned and asked me to take her into the adjoining conservatory; the heat of the ball-room—it had become really oppressive!

From where we were sitting in the cool semi-obscurity, we could see into the great salon. Suddenly mademoiselle's fan touched my arm.

"Straight in front of you—the elderly man without any decorations—that is Mr. Benton, the American ambassador."

I looked at her in questioning silence, and she went on rapidly:

"Allow me to return your parole, Mr. Cary. You have only to take me back to madame, and you are free to act as you think best. But if you will accept a word of advice from me, you will not trust too implicitly even in your country's protecting arm. You must leave Paris at the earliest possible moment, and take the first steamer for New York."

"You forget, mademoiselle," I said, quietly, "that it was only through an oversight that I did not give my word to your father. And, as I look at it, only he can release me from my promise."

"That is nonsense, Mr. Cary. As my father's representative, I accepted your parole, and I am still acting for him in returning it. I take upon myself the entire responsibility; I, too, am Czareska," she concluded, proudly.

A door of escape had opened before me—was I not fully justified in making use of it? I had been trapped unfairly, and I was entitled to turn the tables in kind if I could. But as the game stood now, I had only to pick up the card that had fallen from my adversary's hand. And, finally, as mademoiselle had said, it was she who was responsible.

So here at last the road had forked once and for all. Half a dozen steps, and I should be in a position to claim my country's powerful protection. I could take the night mail to London; Saturday would see me on the steamer, and in a week later I could report at the office of the *New World*. I could cable my coming, and the chief would certainly hold my place open until I could make my explanations in person. It would be the tread-mill again, but we all have to do our share of grinding somewhere, and the *New World* people were not hard taskmasters. In the natural order of events I might count upon promotion to the editorial chair; the chief was getting old, and the owners had as good as offered me the step. I was a fool to even hesitate—for me there was but the one road.

I had no real abiding-place in this great world, with its doubt and mystery and vague alarms. These people were not my people, nor were their ways my ways. One may easily grow dizzy in breathing the thin air of high altitudes, and while the view from the lower levels is not so extensive, one can walk there more comfortably. Yes; I would hesitate no longer—I would go, and at once.

We had risen to our feet, and the light from the doorway fell full on my companion's face. She had dropped her inevitable lorgnette, and her eyes were misty with the soft indecision, the questioning helplessness peculiar to near-sighted people when suddenly deprived of their mechanical aids to vision. Now, short-sightedness in a man is merely a defect that accentuates his natural awkwardness; with a woman, it may become the last, the supremest trick of coquetry, for never is she so essentially feminine as at the moment in which an unsuspected weakness has been betrayed.

And so it happened that in a breath all my fine resolutions had been blown away, and I had committed the greatest folly of which a man can be guilty, the assumption that it has been given to him to read in a woman's face a secret of which she herself is still unconscious. A twofold error, for not only is a man the worst guesser in the world, but no woman ever allows an emotion to escape her until she is satisfied in her own mind as to its true character. And then she does not care if all the world knows it. This is good philosophy, but I learned it later on.

By this time we had half crossed the salon, and I must do one thing or the other. I stopped and took the plunge handsomely.

"Mrs. Verriker will not object if we keep her waiting a few minutes longer. May I have the honor of this *valse*, mademoiselle?"

"But the ambassador may not wait for the end of the number. You are quite sure that you will not regret your decision?"

"Quite sure."

Her hand rested in mine, and a tendril of fine-spun hair was blown for an instant across my lips. The music grew louder, the lights flared higher and higher. Half-way down the side of the room we cannoned violently into an elderly gentleman who was picking his way in short, spasmodic rushes across the polished parquetry. One—two, and we had caught the swing again. I glanced over my shoulder at the open door—the American ambassador had left the ball-room.

CHAPTER VII

A PAGE OF POLITICS

THE ball at the Russian Embassy had marked the last flicker of the season's gayeties. Already *tout Paris* was scattering in every direction, and the city would soon be given up entirely to the tourists and the shopkeepers. Why were we staying on? You see that I use the word "we" advisedly. I had enlisted definitely under the banner of the Czareskas; from henceforth their cause, their fortunes were to be as mine own.

I keep telling myself that I regret nothing, absolutely nothing, but for all that I am restless and on edge this morning after the ball. One of the inevitable conferences is going on in the library, and I am consequently restricted to the four walls of the billiard-room. I try to read, but the words run confusedly together. I have lit half a dozen cigars, and not one of them is fit to smoke. And yet we had come away from the ball at an early hour, and I had not even glanced at the supper-table. Mademoiselle! but there is no hope of catching a glimpse of her until dinner-time.

The visitor that the General has with him this morning becomes indiscreet when excited. He talks so loudly that several times I have been able to distinguish exclamations and even parts of sentences. The word

Ætolia has occurred two or three times, and after some effort I recall that it is the name of a little semi-independent kingdom tucked away in a far corner of the great Soulian empire. This is interesting, and, having summoned Achille, I send him in quest of a gazetteer and of Volume I. of the Encyclopædia.

Yes; Ætolia is nominally a tributary dependency of Soulia, but in reality it has its own king and autonomous government, and ranks as one of the fourth-class powers of Europe. Twenty years ago the Soulians succeeded in reducing these fierce mountaineers to partial subjection. Basil Agricola, the fifth of that name, was deposed and exiled, and his cousin, Jehan Varsof, was elevated to the throne. Jehan is supposed to be well under the Soulian thumb, and as a consequent he is hated and despised by his unruly subjects. But for Soulian backing he could not wear his crown for a single day; moreover, his personal morality is the fitting complement to his political creed; he is neither king nor gentleman. Of course the affair is only an unimportant phase in the vast complexity of the Eastern question, but there are wheels within wheels, and I wonder mightily how these things can concern my friend, the General. I puzzled over it, indeed, the whole afternoon, in the intervals of practising at cushion caroms, but, of course, I arrived at nothing.

Mr. Coventry dined with us, and immediately after coffee was served he carried the Chevalier away with him. The General applied himself to a mass of neglected correspondence, and Mrs. Verriker retired to her room, pleading the excuse of a sick headache. I took the opportunity of challenging mademoiselle to a match at billiards. She looked surprised, but assented, and we made our way to the billiard-room, it being the last apartment in the suite, and situated at the extreme end of the private hall.

Once we were alone, I told her the whole story of what I knew about the disappearance of the "Cardinal's Rose."

"The proof," I concluded, "is locked up in the safe at the office of the New York *Herald*, and awaits your disposal."

She looked at me with just the ripple of a smile on her lips.

"Then you do not know that there was a robbery at the *Herald* office only last night. Mr. Coventry was telling us about it just before dinner. It seems that the thieves made a clean sweep of what was in the safe—money, books, papers—everything."

"Well, mademoiselle, if I am a liar, I am a stupidly clumsy one, and deserve to be tripped up. I have made an incredible charge against the honor of the Chevalier du Midi, and I have not one iota of evidence with which to back it up. My blunder is unpardonable."

"One moment, Mr. Cary; let me think this over."

She sank down upon the big divan, while I made a pretence of knocking the balls about the table; it would not do to forget entirely that we were playing at billiards. Mademoiselle looked up, and I crossed over and stood waiting.

"Can you believe, Mr. Cary, that there are circumstances, certain circumstances, under which the Chevalier du Midi might do such a thing and yet be within his rights? But perhaps I should speak more definitely."

"It is not necessary, mademoiselle. If you can give him the benefit of the doubt, I am only too glad to acquiesce."

"Thank you, Mr. Cary." And then, with a sharper ring in her voice: "Assuming that the jewel was taken, it did not remain in the Chevalier's possession?"

"No."

"What possible chance is there for its recovery?"

I considered: "The clew is a slight one, and the police—"

"It is not a matter for the police—better, indeed, that it should be lost forever."

"And yet its recovery means something to you?"

It was a full half-minute before she answered. Then she said, very quietly:

"It means everything."

"Then, if you will give me permission, mademoiselle, I will undertake the search."

"To find yourself in troubles that you know not of," she said, lightly. "That is not very businesslike, Mr. Cary."

"I don't mean it to be a matter of business," I returned, steadily.

She colored, and then laughed oddly. "But you would still expect a reward?"

"Perhaps."

"Unfortunately, your success in itself would make it impossible for me to pay my debts—that is, in the kind of coin that you would care to receive. But perhaps I speak in riddles?"

"And I cannot pretend to solve them."

"Then accept some serious advice, and keep out of this wretched muddle. The thing is done, and who knows but that it is better as it is. And if I am content to leave it so—"

Well, if I had understood the full measure of her words, would there have been another ending to the story? Perhaps so, and perhaps not; I am rather inclined to think that the long, even strides of Fate are not materially affected by the pebbles that we may cast upon her path, or laboriously seek to remove from it. If in due time we arrive at our destination; it does not greatly matter what has happened on the way.

And yet it might have made the difference—the words that were just now halting on her lips. The next instant we had started apart at the sound of that creaking board in the passage outside.

I had the door open as quickly as I could get to it from around the billiard-table. The corridor was empty and silent, but far down its dimly lighted length it seemed to me that a darker shadow crept for a little space along the wall. But I could not be sure, and now there was nothing to be seen.

I stepped back into the billiard-room and walked straight up to Mademoiselle Czareska.

"To-morrow, mademoiselle, I shall ask the General to accept my parole. I am going house-hunting."

She was very pale, except that a great spot of scarlet glowed on either cheek.

"But remember that my father must know nothing of what you have told me. True or not, he must be the last person in the world to hear of anything that touches the honor of the Chevalier du Midi. You promise me this?"

Of course I assented. Mademoiselle picked up her cue and chalked it thoughtfully.

"So you are going house-hunting. Will you be difficult to suit?"

"Oh, I fancy not. Something quiet and respectable in—say the Rue de Rennes."

"And, preferably—a yellow house?"

"Assuredly, mademoiselle; and, preferably again—*the* yellow house."

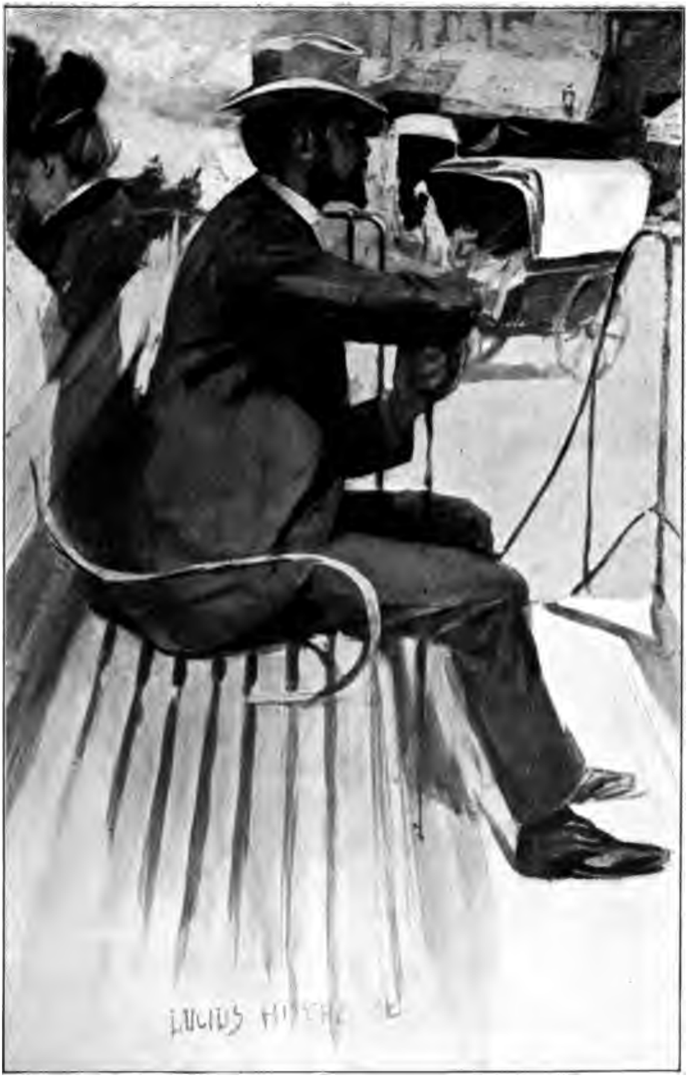
CHAPTER VIII

THE YELLOW HOUSE

THE Rue de Rennes runs from the Place St.-Germain to the Gare du Montparnasse. It is commonplace enough as streets go on the left bank, and I, who have been looking for something of more than ordinary interest, am correspondingly disappointed. For two hours I have been riding to and fro on the tops of the green omnibuses that ply between the Western Station and Père Lachaise, and I have examined both sides of the Rue de Rennes with the most scrupulous attention. But I have discovered nothing. There are dozens of houses covered with the familiar cream-colored stucco that might pass for yellow, and there are four or five others whose prevailing tint is fairly akin to saffron. But there is no house that can be called positively yellow, and I am balked.

It was getting on towards five o'clock, and I had alighted at the corner of the Rue Coëtlogon, intending to walk the few blocks to St.-Germain-des-Prés. I wanted to smoke, but I had used up all my matches, and I was consequently looking out for a tobacconist's shop.

After all, and in spite of my disappointment, I was enjoying the outing. It was over two weeks since I had made my first call upon "Mr. Smith," and it seemed good to be in the open air again. And this


LUCIUS HITCH

"FOR TWO HOURS I HAVE BEEN RIDING"

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was Paris in early summer: the white stuccoed houses shone resplendent in the sunlight, and the gay window-boxes of flowers smiled upon every side. Truly it was good to be alive on such a day as this. By this time I was nearing the Rue du Vieux Colombier, and I saw the long-desired tobacco-shop on the other side of the street. I was about to cross over, when I happened to notice the number of the house that I was passing. It was 82. Now the numeral 82 was that of my college class, and I never see it in any connection without giving it at least momentary attention. I glanced up at the windows; what gorgeous geraniums! There was a box of the flowers in every one of the first and second story windows, and, being in full bloom, they made a magnificent blaze of color. I have a barbaric sort of fondness for red, it is so full of warmth and life, and I pulled up short to feast my eyes on the show. As I stood there, a second-story casement opened, and an old man appeared with a watering-pot. High as he was above me, I could see that he had a face and head not unlike the portraits of the Abbé Listz. A gentle, kindly old man, pottering peacefully among his beloved flowers on this perfect summer day, his white locks contrasting sharply with the scarlet of the geraniums—really a pretty picture.

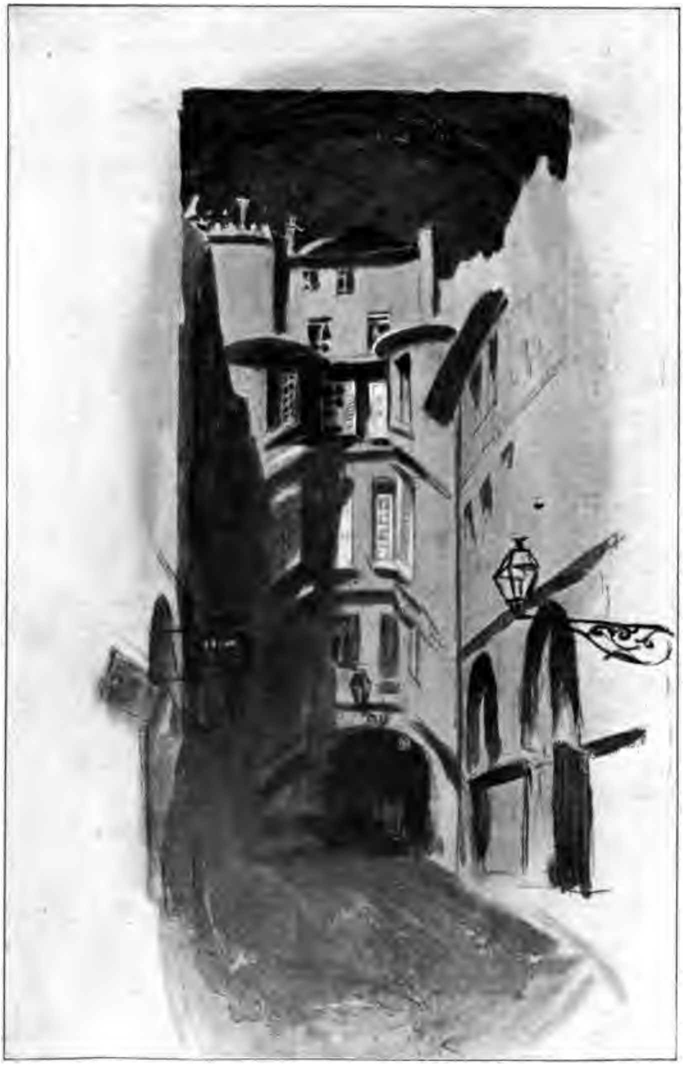
Something fluttered through the air and fell on the pavement at my feet. Ah! he must have accidentally snapped off a stem, and the flower was treasure-trove for my button-hole. I stepped forward and picked it up. It was not a geranium at all, but an artificial affair of colored paper and cloth, such as are made by the thousand in Paris for use in millinery.

Well, I may be over-sensitive, but the discovery gave me a peculiarly disagreeable shock. Of course, there can be nothing immoral about the use of artificial flowers under ordinary circumstances. No one is likely to be deceived by the enormous conservatories that the milliners delight in loading upon their creations, and the practice is consequently a mere matter of taste. But to stick these flaunting imitations into good, honest earth, to water and care for them as though they were really part of the creation which God, having looked upon, had declared to be very good—this, I say, was a thing almost too monstrous for belief. The deception was so pitiful, so inutile; and yet there must have been some ulterior object in the wretched farce. Perhaps the artificial geraniums were cheaper in the end than the real ones; but why was it necessary to have flowers at all?—unless, indeed, that No. 82 might in no particular be distinguishable from its neighbors on either side.

I looked up once again, and my gaze fell upon a portion of the wall partially concealed by the overhanging balcony. Strange that I had not noticed that the building had been recently stuccoed over, or at least repainted. Here was a little piece that the brush of the workman had failed to reach—the original color stood out vividly, an unmistakable yellow.

M. Philippe Ribot, the proprietor of the tobacco-shop, was a most urbane personage, and he seemed to take an unaffected pleasure in supplying me with a sou's worth of vestas. It was not difficult to engage him in conversation, and of course he knew everything about the neighborhood and its inhabitants.

"The house opposite, at No. 82? Why, yes; Maître Vauclot lives there. You can see his name in full on the silver plate underneath the bell-pull—'Maître Étienne Vauclot, Écrivain Public.'"



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"Écrivain Public?"

"Precisely, m'sieu. Business transacted, petitions drawn up, accounts audited, letters written—what you will. And all with secrecy and despatch."

"A good neighbor, I suppose?"

"A most estimable man, m'sieu. His services are at the disposal of all—and not a centime to pay until the affair is concluded satisfactorily. And what a beautiful hand he writes! You will not find that sort of a man everywhere."

The door opened, and a woman literally flung herself into the shop. I tried to follow what she was saying, but her clipped and rapid vocables were too much for my unaccustomed ear. And M. Ribot's answer was equally unintelligible.

The woman threw up her hands, a tragic gesture of disappointment, and rushed out as precipitately as she had entered. A rapidly growing crowd of sympathizing friends and lookers-on awaited her, and the procession passed on to the next shop.

M. Ribot looked perplexed, even worried. He removed his ridiculous fez, which he probably wore out of respect to the fragrant Egyptian weed that he did not sell, and rubbed his shiny forehead with an equally shiny cuff.

"It is too bad," he said, gently. "A most excellent woman is Mlle. Agathe, and she adores her rascal of a nephew."

"An accident?"

"Who can tell, m'sieu. You see he is at service over there—the *rive droit*, you comprehend. Regularly every Saturday afternoon he comes to see his aunt; she has always been like a mother to him, and her house is his home."

"Well?"

"It is now five o'clock, and he is never later than three at the outside—the sun itself is not more punctual. Besides, he was seen some two hours ago standing at the corner of the Rue du Vieux Colombier. It is really most perplexing."

"One would think you were speaking of a lost child," I said, jocularly. "A grown-up man stops to light his cigarette in broad daylight at the corner of one of the most crowded of Paris streets. Suddenly he disappears like a stone thrown into a pond—this is not reasonable, my friend."

"Nevertheless, it is two hours now, and he is still missing," returned the tobacconist. "And that makes the fourth within a month," he concluded, staring at me with frightened, wide-opened eyes.

"The fourth!"

"Assuredly, m'sieu. There was Victor Berger, of the War Office, Gillaudet, the perfumer, and old Madame Meibel. Three, m'sieu, since the first of the month, and that fine young man makes the fourth."

"Nonsense! They will return."

"Ah, but they do not. And here in Paris, m'sieu, people do not willingly leave their homes and families, all without a word."

"But the police—are they doing nothing?"

"What is there for the police to do? They cannot see into the depths of the earth, nor through stone walls. And yet m'sieu is right, undoubtedly; the missing ones will return in good time, and all will be well."

"Yes; all will be well," I assented, mechanically. My cigar was drawing badly, and I had mislaid my box of vestas.

"There, now! If m'sieu will be kind enough to observe, Monsieur Vauclot is standing at the door."

I looked, and saw two men at the entrance of the "yellow house." The old man, with his white hair tucked under a silk skull-cap, was the same whom I had seen at the windows. He must be Maître Vauclot. And the other? It was the "Pompadour" at last.

The two men stood talking for a few moments, and then the elder retired into the house, while my man started briskly down the street. I was after him instantly, unheeding sundry vociferous reminders that I was forgetting both my purchases and my change. I had had a good view of the fellow, and I was sure that "Monsieur Pompadour" was none other than Mr. Giles Coventry in disguise. The general resemblance was enough for me in spite of the difference made by the red wig *à la pompadour*. The scoundrel! I would unmask him on the spot. I no longer stopped to think or to reason. A dozen more steps, and I was at his side, and had touched his arm. He turned and confronted me.

"Mr. Coventry, I believe," speaking as coolly as I could.

There was just the faintest quiver of an eyelid; I saw it, and exulted. Then he gathered himself instantly.

"Monsieur is mistaken," he said, calmly.

"I am not mistaken," I retorted. "You are Giles Coventry, wig and all. Allow me," and I deliberately knocked off his hat and gave a contemptuous tug to one of the fiery-red locks. Appalling blunder! It was the man's own hair. He was no more disguised than I myself.

I stammered out something by way of apology, and he listened imperturbably.

"The explanation is hardly satisfactory," he said, coldly; "but you are young, and it is possible that it was a simple mistake. We will let it go at that." He bowed, swung round on his heel with military precision, and disappeared down a side street, while I stood staring after him, with my senses as far abroad as though I had been struck with a bludgeon.

During my walk home I had ample leisure in which to assure myself that I had been an idiot profound and unmitigated. Even assuming that I had been right, and that "Pompadour" was Coventry in disguise, what possible advantage could I have gained by unmasking him? In doing so I should simply be putting him on his guard, and making the recovery of the "Cardinal's Rose" still more remote. In a case like this, the detection and punishment of a criminal was a matter of secondary importance, if, indeed, it was to be thought of at all. What I wanted was the great ruby itself, and, having lighted by chance upon so promising a clew, I must go and spoil everything by making an open adversary of a man whose very acquaintance I should have steadfastly avoided. "Pompadour" might not be Mr. Giles Coventry in disguise, but he was certainly the accomplice in the affair of Dover pier, and I might have been able to use that knowledge to some advantage. It was too bad!

Coventry came to dinner that night, and I felt almost ashamed to look at him. It seemed as though he must know of the suspicions that I had entertained, and yet I had surely some justification for my mistake. Strange, how every trick of eye and manner irresistibly recalled the image of his double of the Rue de Rennes! But the embarrassment was all on my side. Never had Coventry been in so brilliant a humor, and his flashes of wit were so incessant as to suggest to mademoiselle the propriety of having the wax candles removed. And insensibly the memory of my recent humiliation faded away, and we were all merry together.

Some one suggested fencing, and we adjourned to the billiard-room for coffee. At the far end there was enough of clear space for the use of the foils, and the high divans that lined the walls made comfortable vantage-points for the spectators. The General did me the honor of crossing swords for a brief assault, and I acquitted myself remarkably well for a novice. Indeed, the Chevalier was so proud of his pupil that he insisted upon backing me for an encounter with Coventry. I could do no less than assent, and Coventry, after some amiable haggling over the stakes, which mademoiselle was to hold, picked up a foil and intimated, smilingly, that my doom was sealed.

Of course we both wore the ordinary wire mask to protect the face and eyes against accidental injury, but, since the night was warm, I had discarded the heavy plastron for a skeleton-jacket, as being more comfortable. Hardly had the blades rung together in the salute than mademoiselle cried, "*Halte!*" Her quick eye had discovered that the button on Coventry's foil was loose, and consequently unsafe. Several days ago du Midi had noticed that the foil needed attention, and had placed it by itself at the extreme right of the rack, intending to have the repair made at the first opportunity. But the matter had been forgotten, and Fate, with her usual perversity, had apparently guided Coventry's hand to the one weapon out of the dozen that was not in proper condition for use. Lucky, indeed, that mademoiselle was present and had been able to point out the mistake before any harm was done.

Mrs. Verriker had drawn mademoiselle aside upon some trifling pretext, and Coventry, replacing the imperfect foil in the rack, chose another, and engaged me without any further preliminaries. I soon real-

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ized that he was my master, and it was only my agility and an uncommonly good eye that enabled me to hold my ground in the first few minutes. I knew that he was playing with me, but it was only little by little that I realized the deadly purpose behind that cool deliberation of thrust and parry. I did not have to look at the rack of foils to be assured that he had only pretended to exchange his weapon, and that at any moment his naked point might be opposed to my unprotected breast. In fencing, the cardinal principle is that you must never lose sight of your adversary's eyes, and in Coventry's I could read the truth. He had intentionally repossessed himself of the foil with the loosened button, and my death was the logical consequent of his act. I must die, and he was only waiting to be sure that when he did strike it should be in the right place.

His eyes told me all this without bravado, and yet without the slightest attempt at concealment. He was giving me fair warning of his purpose, as the least thing that a gentleman could do under the circumstances; but there was no hint of hesitancy in that look. It was necessary that I should be put out of the way, and the lot had fallen upon him. He might regret the necessity, but he would not dispute it.

The mind works with infinite rapidity at times of great stress, and all that I have written down here had been consciously thought out during the last second or two in which he had been steadily forcing me back to the side wall. My parries were growing weaker as his thrusts grew stronger. I could feel that the loosened button had been finally stripped from the point of my adversary's foil; he was only waiting to be certain of his aim before giving the final lunge.

It was coming now, sure and strong, and my feeble parry would be twisted aside as though it were a wisp of straw. And yet I must attempt it, for since a man can die but once, it is fitting that he should die like a man. I could feel his blade worming inside my guard, and then in an instant my right foot had slipped, and I was down on one knee, while Coventry's foil, just grazing my left shoulder, shivered itself into half a dozen pieces against the hard brick of the partition wall.

The Chevalier laughed triumphantly as he assisted me to rise, and declared that I had more than fulfilled his predictions. Here I stood, untouched, while Coventry had actually disarmed himself; the stakes had been fairly won, and he should call upon mademoiselle to hand them over.

I was feeling a bit tremulous and shaky, but I managed to smile back at him, and a moment after Coventry came up and spoke very handsomely of my fencing abilities. All I needed was practice and a little more suppleness in wrist-work. He himself would be glad to put me up to a few wrinkles at any time, and with that he actually held out his hand. And I took it—there was really nothing else to do. The bold blue eyes smiled frankly into mine; the sincerity of his present attitude was absolute, equally so with the deadliness of his unaccomplished purpose. I accepted the one as I had the other, and we shook hands.

As we went out to the drawing-room for a rubber at whist, Coventry pressed something into my hand. "For a souvenir," he whispered. It was the button from off his foil. So it seems that we understand each other; well, so much the better.

Postscript.—It was Vital who attended me to-night instead of Achille, who had originally been assigned to my personal service. In answer to my inquiry, Vital informed me that Achille had left the house about noon for his free half-day, but had failed to return at the usual hour. Odd! for he had given no hint that he wanted to leave his place, and he had taken away none of his belongings. The General was much annoyed, and had notified the police department of his disappearance.

"Disappearance, eh! According to M. Ribot, that makes No. 5," I said to myself, as I jumped into bed.

CHAPTER IX

THE MAHOGANY CLOTHES-PRESS

IT was four o'clock on the following afternoon when I found myself again in the Rue de Rennes. I had been able to secure a few minutes' private conversation with mademoiselle during the morning, and had told her of my discoveries — of everything, indeed, except my blunder in trying to identify the "Pompadour" with Mr. Giles Coventry. If that mistake were to do any harm, we should know of it soon enough, and otherwise there was no use in discussing it.

"And now, mademoiselle," I concluded, "I am going to make an attempt this afternoon to learn the secret of the 'yellow house.' I have no particular plan, but somehow I shall get inside its doors. After that I shall be lucky or unlucky, as Fate may dispose the lot. Finally, if I do not return by ten o'clock of to-morrow, Monday morning, you may take such action as may seem best."

She looked at me out of grave and troubled eyes. "If you succeed, Mr. Cary, you will do so without my assistance; and if you fail, there is no way in which I can help you. You must understand this clearly."

"So I have everything to lose and nothing to gain," I retorted, with just the accent of bitterness in my voice.

She flashed back at me. "You made your choice at the embassy ball, and you confirmed it on the night when we played at billiards. Even now you have still time to turn back, if you will."

"One moment, mademoiselle. I intend to go on with my task, and I will tell you why. Up to a month ago I was a foot-passenger upon the common highroad of life. It is safe walking there, but the hedges are too high to look over, and so it grows monotonous. Now I have been offered the reins and the box-seat, and the temptation is too strong to be resisted. The course may be a long one, or it may end just around the first curve. But in either case it will be a fast ride, and I shall have an excellent view of the scenery. Have I, in turn, made myself understood?"

"I understand," she said, simply, and held out her hand. And so we parted, and I went on my way to the "yellow house." If only Chance himself might be waiting for me on the threshold!

As I have said, it was four o'clock when I reached the Rue de Rennes, and the street looked comparatively deserted. The *bourgeoisie* were all taking their Sunday pleasures at Passy and Neuilly. Even my friend, the tobacconist, had drawn down his shades, and was doubtless engaged in drinking his bock at some gayly painted cabaret upon the lower river. Paris at this hour of the day was quiet and Sunday-like, even when judged by New England standards.

Arrived at the neighborhood of No. 82, I made a careful examination of its exterior. The building was one of four stories in height, and had an ell at the back that ran to the side street, there being but one house between No. 82 and the corner. The ground floor had once been used as a shop, but the door and windows had been boarded up, and it had evidently been unoccupied for a long time. Apparently Maître Vauclot needed and used the entire house, and he was doubtless rich enough to afford the eccentricity. There was really nothing in the outward appearance of the "yellow house" to distinguish it from its neighbors. There were lace curtains and heavy hangings at all the windows in the stories above the street, and it was impossible to see into the rooms. But it all looked deadly respectable here in the heart of commonplace Paris on a sleepy Sunday afternoon. For a moment I forgot myself and my errand, and wondered idly at my interest in prosaic-looking No. 82. What the devil was I doing in this galley? Then my glance rested again upon the scarlet glories of those gay window-boxes, and I remembered. And a little shiver ran across my shoulders, albeit it was July and the sun was hot upon my back.

My plan for gaining admission to the house was simple enough. Dressed in ordinary workman garb, I should represent myself as needing the services of a scrivener to compose a letter to my sister in Alsace. The fact that I came from a German-speaking country would excuse my accent, and I should not pass myself off as illiterate—that pretension might be a difficult one to support. The sprained right wrist which I carried in a sling made from a silk handkerchief must account for my needing the services of an amanuensis. Once inside — but that would take care of itself. I crossed the street, and stood before the door of No. 82. Once, twice, and then three times I wrenched at the rusty bell-pull before the summons was answered. Then the door opened part way (for the chain had been kept on), and a man's face looked out at me.

It was not an engaging countenance upon which I gazed in turn. The yellow, parchment-like skin was stretched as tightly as a drum-head over the prominent cheek-bones, and the scanty eyebrows and beard were added characteristics of a Mongolian physiognomy. And yet, when I had a chance to see him on several subsequent occasions, I became convinced that he was not an Oriental at all, but as purely Western as myself. The racial resemblance was simply a curious divergence from type, and was but skin-deep. Nature often amuses herself.

The man's eyes were extraordinarily bright and piercing, and he kept them unwinkingly upon me as I explained my errand. Was M. Vauclot at home?

For an answer the door was deliberately slammed in my face, and I made up my mind that the acting of a part was not one of my accomplishments. It was only, however, for the purpose of unfastening the chain, for a moment later the door was reopened, and the adventure had begun. The servant did not speak, but he gave a guttural croak that I interpreted into an invitation to enter.

It was a vaulted passage, some thirty feet in length, through which we passed, and it led to an interior court-yard of perhaps fifty feet long by thirty wide.

On three sides it was bordered by the dead walls of neighboring houses, while on the fourth was the real entrance to No. 82. Pale, unwholesome-looking weeds grew between the cracks of the paving-stones, and in a far corner stood half a dozen lemon-trees and rubber-plants, all dead and withered in their paint-blistered boxes. Outside the sun was still high in the sky, but not a ray reached to the bottom of this gloomy well-hole. Possibly for an hour or two at midday the sunshine might fall upon these cold, damp slabs, but one imagined that it got away at the earliest possible moment. Perhaps, too, the court-yard resented the intrusion upon its sickly privacy.

Through a heavy oak door and up a flight of stairs, and I was ushered into a large first-floor room. There the servant left me, still without saying a word, and I had a chance to study my surroundings.

The apartment was a spacious one, and it occupied the entire front of the house. Consequently, it was built above the vaulted entrance passage, and in addition to its windows that looked on the street, it had one that opened upon the court-yard. The ceiling was high, and the walls, wainscoted in stained oak, were lined with book-shelves. The house was probably an old one, but the fittings of the room were solid, even handsome of their kind, and the furnishing was in correspondence.

There was a big table, strewn with tape-bound papers, at the far end of the room, and also a cabinet-press that seemed to be filled with pigeon-holes. Clearly this was Maître Vauclot's study, or office, if you prefer.

He had entered so quietly that I had not been aware of his presence until I found him standing at my side, and regarding me intently. It gave me a dislike to the man at once; it is a good general principle to be distrustful of people whose boots never creak.

It was a strong face, no doubt of that, and, with its crown of whitened hair, it was still wonderfully like that of Liszt. And yet different; there were certain lines in it which I had not noticed from the street. I wondered if I should be able to read between them.

I stated my request, and he assented with a curt nod, and seated himself at the big table. Now, I had carefully composed the few sentences of my mythical letter, even putting in a few blunders by way of artistic effect. I had only to stammer and hesitate a little in the delivery, and the part would be perfectly played. Unfortunately, I made one blunder too many. I began, in clear and well-modulated tones: "My dear sister—" and then stopped in genuine confusion. I had spoken in English.

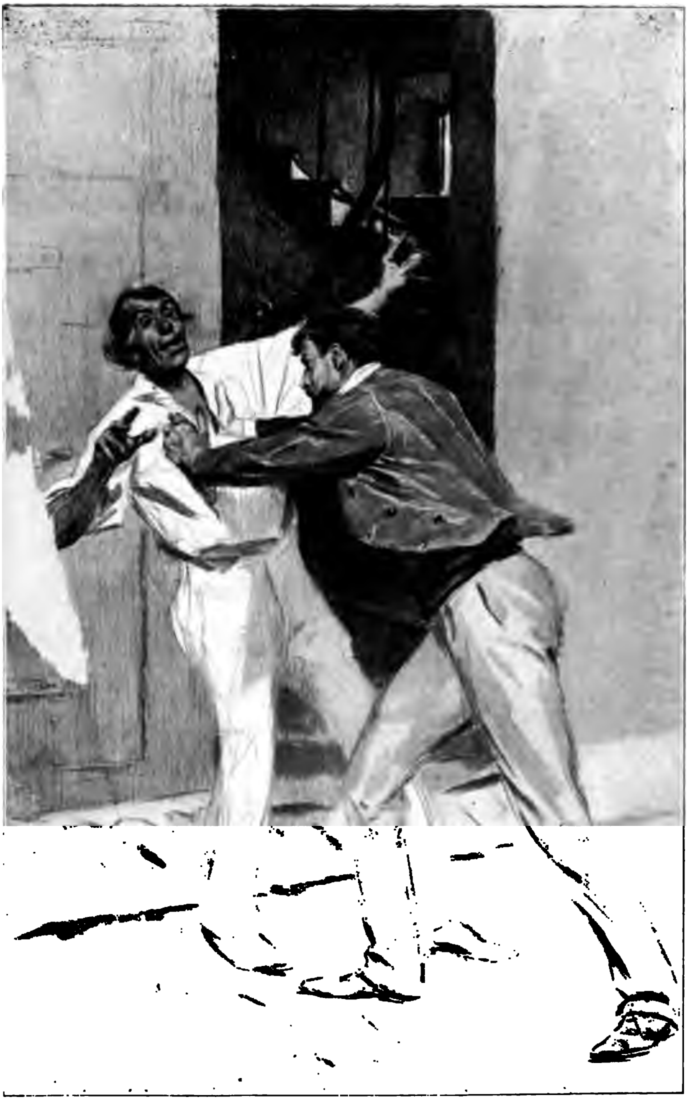
Vauclot looked up sharply at me. With presence of mind I might still have carried off the slip, but my wits went scattering like a cloud of feathers. There I sat, flushing up to the eyes, and nervously twirling in my supposedly injured right hand my heavy walking-stick.

The man sitting opposite to me crumpled up in his hand the sheet of note-paper, and tossed it contemptuously into the waste-basket.

"Go," he said, harshly.

Out of very shame at being entrapped so easily I tried to explain, to protest. He cut me short, curtly. "It would be poor policy for me to spoil so clumsy a tool. Get back to your employers, but do not press me again upon your good fortune. Perroquet, the door."

There was nothing else to do, and I left the room in bitterness of spirit. I had had my chance, and I had failed at the first throw. In another minute I should be in the street, and the "yellow house" would keep its secrets. Ah, what a wretched bungler I had proved myself! And yet, as I passed into the comparative coolness of the corridor, the sense of overwhelming depression suddenly cleared away, quite as though it had been a part of the material atmosphere of Maître Vauclot's office. And then, as my pulse leaped to its normal beat and my hands ceased to twitch, I found my courage and resolution returning. Give me but the smallest foothold, and I would yet pluck the beard of this insolent Maître Vanclot.



"A VIOLENT SHOVE, FULL IN THE CHEST"

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The servant stood back as I passed into the hall, and followed close upon me as I descended the stairs. My mind was working rapidly now, and when the inspiration came I was ready to seize it. It was only a bare chance, but I jumped at it without the smallest hesitation.

To understand the situation you must know that the vaulted passage leading from the street to the court-yard was unlighted, and I had found it so dark upon my entrance that I had been obliged to feel my way along the wall. It was under cover of this same semi-darkness that I now prepared to play my ruse.

We had crossed the court-yard, and were about to enter the tunnel, when I turned and gave my attendant a violent shove full in the chest. Taken by surprise, he lost his footing upon the greasy flagstones, and fell flat on his back, while I raced down the passage at top speed.

As I had hoped, the key was in the door. I unlocked and swung it wide open, at the same time slipping between the door and the wall upon which it backed. Fortunately the masonry was recessed so that the door might stand flush with the surface of the wall, and being of slight build, I could squeeze myself into a comparatively narrow space.

I heard the servant give an astonished kind of gasp as he went down, and for an instant he lay half stunned. Then, recovering himself, he found his feet, and came stumbling and stumping down the passage to find the outer door wide open and no one in sight. Through the crack I could see his face as he stepped out cautiously upon the threshold, and it expressed both fear and amazement. He looked up and down the street for at least a dozen times to assure himself that I was really not in sight, and it was a full two minutes before he stepped back into the passage, and began to close the door. He was evidently satisfied that I was out of the house, but I could see that he was still puzzling over the inexplicable performance with which I had signalized my departure.

It was the critical moment as the door swung inward, and, of course, it had to come—a sneeze. I did my best to stifle it, but the dust that I had stirred up hung in an irritating cloud about my head, and the sneeze would not be denied. Like murder, it was out; I stood convicted out of my own mouth.

I waited shamefacedly for the man to turn around, but he was still fumbling at the fastenings of the door, and there was not the slightest indication in his manner that he was aware of my proximity. Could it be possible? and my mind harked back to the incident of our brief interview at the door. I recalled how intently his eyes had been fixed upon my face as I talked with him; nay, it was upon my lips that he had hung! Now I understood—the man was deaf and dumb!

When Maître Vauclot ordered that I should be shown out, I recalled that he had addressed his servant by name. But "Perroquet" is rather a nickname—it means "parrot"—and the designation was an appropriate one, that guttural croak could only be compared to the inflectionless tones of a talking bird. Perroquet, indeed! No wonder that I had sneezed with impunity; for that matter, I might have fired off a pistol at his ear without gaining the honor of his attention. And then I realized sharply that he could still see, if he could not hear, and I pressed back into the farthest corner of my hiding-place. Would he look up? I shut my own eyes, remembering how subtly the thought-waves travel between the watcher and the watched. It was a great effort of will, but it had its reward; in another moment he had turned, and was retracing his steps along the passage. The ruse had succeeded, and now I had only to wait as patiently as might be for the friendly darkness that should cover my advance movement.

At half after six I considered that I might venture, and, taking off my boots, I went cautiously through the passage and across the court-yard. The entrance door of the "yellow house" was unfastened, and I had no difficulty in mounting the staircase, and in gaining the first landing. The hallway was dimly lighted by a single gas-jet, and all the doors opening upon it were closed. I could hear the sound of regular pacing footsteps in the front room; the master, at least, would not be likely to interfere with me. But where was the servant? Still, I must take some risk, and I had a great advantage in that Perroquet must actually see me to be aware of my presence in the house. My first care must be to familiarize myself with the internal arrangements of the building, and if—as I had reason to suppose—it was inhabited only by Vauclot and his deaf and dumb servant, I ought not to have much difficulty in keeping myself under cover.

As has been said, the office occupied the entire front width of the building. Back of this was an apartment whose door yielded easily to my touch. I entered, and found that it was a dark room, and half filled with a lumber of old furniture. At both ends of the apartment were sliding-doors, whose glass panels had been veiled by silk curtains. As these curtains were on my side of the door, I found no difficulty in taking a survey of Maître Vauclot's office. He himself sat writing at the big table, and the light from a hanging lamp fell full upon his silvered head and fine intellectual face. I could have stood there and watched him indefinitely, but I quickly realized that I should not learn much by so doing, and I made my way cautiously to the glass doors at the other end of the room.

The apartment into which I now looked was furnished as a dining-room, and the table was already set with three covers; perhaps Maître Vauclot was expecting guests for dinner this evening. On the left of the room were windows which must open upon the court-yard, and the door on the right led to the extension of the main building that ran off at right angles and faced upon the side street. This ell probably contained the kitchen and offices, and, indeed, Perroquet entered a moment later with a couple of bottles in his hand. He dusted them off tenderly, and, going to the sideboard, proceeded to decant them. Evidently he was both butler and footman of this unique establishment, and perhaps chef as well. At all events, I had him located now, and I could proceed with my explorations without fear of interruption.

Letting myself out of the dark room, I went up to the second landing of the staircase, and tried the handle of the door leading to the front room. It turned, and I looked in; it was not necessary to enter, for the room was absolutely bare of furnishing, except for the heavy curtains at the windows. And yet it was from these windows that I had first seen Maître Vauclot pottering genially among his cloth and paper geraniums. False flowers to cheer an empty room! Well, at least there was consistency in the idea. Back of this was another dark and empty closet-room, but the third, *en suite*, corresponding to the dining-room below, was fitted up as a sleeping apartment. It contained only the indispensable articles of bedroom furniture, and these were of the cheapest and commonest manufacture. In all probability this was Vauclot's own bedroom, but there was nothing about it to call for a more than cursory examination.

The ell extension opened off of this room, but here again the flickering light of a wax match showed only bare and tenantless walls. There was plainly nothing more of interest on this floor, and I went on up to the third story.

As before, I looked first into the front room. It was empty, like the others, save for an immense mahogany clothes-press, or wardrobe, that stood against the wall, dividing this room from the one immediately back of it. While I stood looking at it, and wondering at its possible use, I heard a noise in the hall below—some one was coming up-stairs. I stepped into the hall and listened attentively. I knew that shuffling walk by this time—it was Perroquet. He must not see me; but where could I conceal myself if he should happen to come up to this floor?

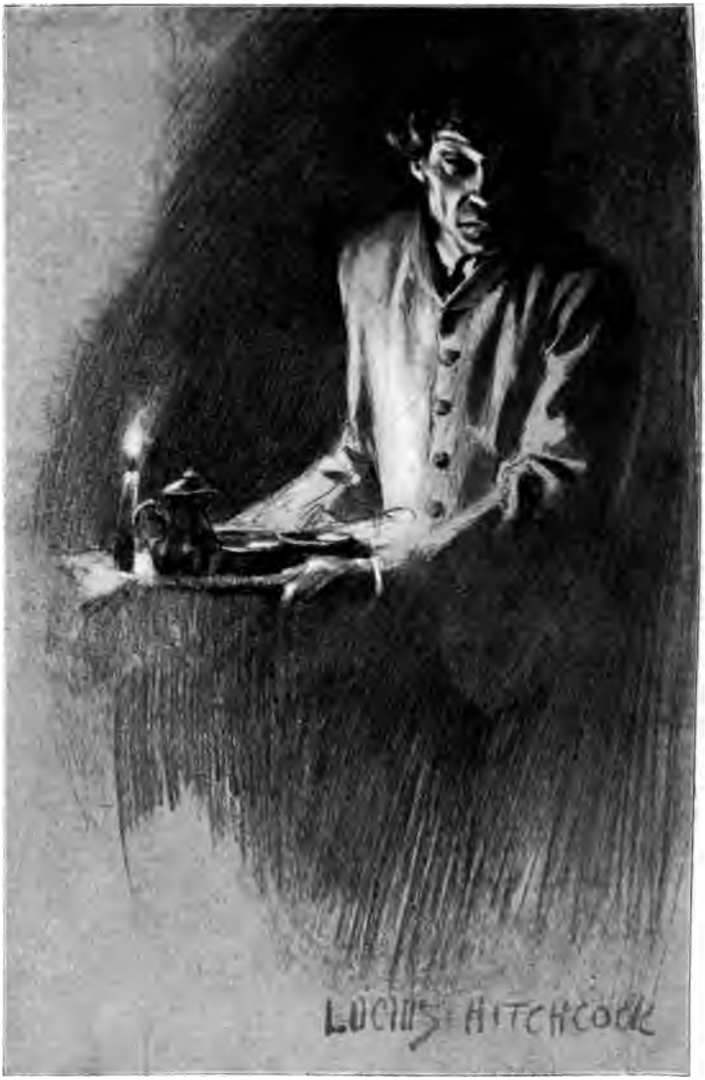
There was still another story, but the stairs leading to it had been boarded up, and the door at the bottom was locked. I looked along the corridor for the doors leading to the other rooms, but there was not the sign of one to be seen. If any existed, they had long since been bricked up, and plastered over. And yet there must be rooms, or at least empty space, behind this blank wall. What did it mean?

Leaning over the stair-rail, I saw that Perroquet, carrying a lighted candle, was already at the foot of the stairs leading to this, the third floor; beyond a doubt he was coming up.

Stepping back into the empty room, I looked about despairingly. I had a presentiment that the man's errand on this floor had to do with the clothes-press, and if so I certainly could not hide there. Besides, I had tried the door, and found it locked. Ah, the balcony! I could step out on that and wait. Throwing up the long window, I sprang out on the balcony, and crouched down on the slatted floor. Hardly had I drawn the window into place, when Perroquet entered the room, carrying a tray covered with a white cloth. In one corner of it a candle had been wedged, so as to stand upright, and allow him the use of both hands in the management of his unwieldy burden.

Placing the tray upon the floor, the old fellow took a key from his pocket, and inserted it into the lock of the clothes-press. There was nothing extraordinary in this, but I was certainly unprepared for what followed. Taking up the tray, Perroquet deliberately hoisted himself through the wardrobe door, and closed it behind him.

Ten, fifteen, and then twenty minutes I mounted guard on the balcony, with my face pressed against the pane, and my eyes glued on that extraordinary clothes-press. The longer I waited, the less advisable I thought it to make a move. It would have been poor policy for me to have slipped away down-stairs, leaving an enemy in my rear; and then there was a fine taste of adventure in this affair of a wardrobe standing duty as the portal to Nomansland. The situation appealed to my fancy; there might be something more to see when Master Perroquet returned from his travels. And so I waited. At the end of the twenty minutes the door swung open, and my man reappeared, quite as though it were the most natural thing in the world for one to step out of a clothes-press with a lighted candle in one hand and an empty tea-tray in the other. The lock was a spring one, and so he merely pushed the door into place, and stumped out into the passage-way. I was in the room as soon as he had left it, and my pulse ran up a beat or two as I saw that by some oversight he had left the key


LUCIUS HITCHCOCK

"PERROQUET ENTERED THE ROOM, CARRYING A TRAY"

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sticking in the lock. And then, as I put out my hand to take it, I became aware that Perroquet was coming back; of course, he had missed the key, and was returning to get it.

There was no time for me to get to my balcony, for already the light of his candle was upon the threshold. I turned the knob, and, as the door opened, I slipped inside the clothes-press, taking the key with me. Perhaps he would conclude that he had taken the key out after all, and that it was mislaid in a corner of one of his pockets. I listened, as the footsteps paused in front of the wardrobe, and clumsy fingers fumbled impatiently with the lock. Then I could hear him clattering down the passage, and descending the stairs. For once Chance had been over-kind to me.

The suspense of those waiting moments had been so intense that I had received no impression whatever from my surroundings. I now realized that there was no back to the wardrobe—it simply served to screen the entrance of the room behind it. Cautiously I felt for the door-knob. It yielded. I edged back, then down a step, and knew that I was standing in the secret chamber.

The room was pitch-dark, but I had plenty of wax vestas. I lit one, and looked about me. A curious-looking apartment this! Wainscoted, ceiled, and floored in some kind of unpolished metal, without a window, and with but the one door by which I had entered. And it was absolutely empty save for what seemed to be a heap of rags lying in a corner. An empty room! and yet, as I stand and look, I become aware that it has an occupant. It is Fear himself who lodges here. Out of the flickering shadows a gigantic figure takes shape and advances upon me. I am at the door leading into the clothes-press; it has swung to, and there is no handle on this side. I find the key-hole, but the key slips from my shaking fingers. I hear the clash of metal upon metal — I am on my knees—I have felt for it as far as I can reach—

It seems an eternity before I can get hold of my box of vestas. I drop half a dozen, and scratch another at the wrong end. Then the little flame sputters up to a temporary brilliancy; I force myself to look.

The bundle of rags has resolved itself into a human form, and, as we stare wildly at each other, I recognize Achille, my valet, missing, as you remember, since Friday night. Then the match goes out with a little hiss, and we are in darkness again.

CHAPTER X

THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

YOU who know your Balzac will remember Ma'ame Nourisson—that terrible old woman who dressed in a purple-red gown, and whose broad feet seemed to overflow her satin shoes. Her profession? Well, in her own words, it was the part of Fate that she played—an arbiter of Destiny, with particular attention paid to the "family business." Her specialty, indeed, was that delicate field of operation which we may call the removal of the superfluous; a suspicious consort, an unacceptable will, an importunate creditor—it was all one to Ma'ame Nourisson, and although her fees were high, satisfaction was guaranteed, and invariably given. Cross with silver the itching palm of Ma'ame Nourisson, and one might laugh in the face of the devil himself. No wonder that she drove a roaring trade there in Paris in 1830.

Now business is business, and a profitable one is not to be lightly abandoned. Ma'ame Nourisson had her successors, trained in her own school, and some of them capable of giving points to the mistress herself. Her profession has become a science—a development of her genius that would have delighted her heart, and which is a veritable monument to her memory. Here in Paris, and in the closing year of the nineteenth century! Why not, if you please? Has human nature changed? Are the husbands all faithful nowadays, and are there no dead men's shoes to be filled? Under the thin black crust of the asphalt the lava fires still burn—the safety-valve must be provided if one would not run the risk of an explosion. And the police, be it remembered, are not allowed to meddle with affairs that are strictly private—the "family business" of which we have already spoken. There is no longer a Fouché at the Ministry of Police, and so Maître Étienne Vauclot is permitted to hang out his sign.

Mme. Meibel? Yes; Achille had often heard of her—a rich old woman who made a fool of herself by marrying a boy thirty years her junior. An ill-assorted union, and naturally an unhappy one. It was common report that madame quarrelled frightfully with her boy-husband, to whom she had made over the bulk of her property. The height of folly indeed!

And it had been all on account of another woman—a black-eyed jade of a milliner's assistant, in whose hand young Meibel was as wax. Ah, yes! a sordid story—a tragedy in drab; let it end as quickly as possible. It was now three weeks since Mme. Meibel had been seen by any of her neighbors of the Rue de Rennes. In another fortnight they would begin to forget.

"Gillaudet, the perfumer!" continued Achille, meditatively. "It seems to me that I know the name, that I have seen it somewhere, but just now it escapes me. Probably some good citizen of Meaux or Chantilly, who is accustomed to come to the city once a week to visit his married daughter; he has his pockets stuffed with sweets for the children, and he would as soon think of entering a fiacre as of throwing himself from the Pont Neuf. You know the type, m'sieu. *Enfin!* There comes a day when he does not appear as usual, and that is the end of the story. Pouf! There are many ill winds blowing in Paris."

"And there was a certain M. Victor Berger?" I continued, inquiringly. The three names, as you see, had stuck in my memory.

"Oh, perfectly! an old friend of my aunt's. He used to play picquet with her almost every evening. That is a bad business, I am afraid, m'sieu. As I understand it, the old man happened to unearth some frauds in the commissary department, and there were several handsome names mixed up in it. Old Berger was scrupulously honest, and he deemed it his duty—well, he got more than one weighty hint, but he was Breton, you know, and a perfect mule for stubbornness. Ask yourself if anything can be done with such a man? One fine day there is a vacant stool in his office, and, after waiting a reasonable length of time, the incident is declared closed, and some lucky under-clerk gets a rise in the world. An honest man, and a good citizen, m'sieu, but what is that compared to the saving of a dozen reputations?"

Achille had spoken lightly, but there came a break in his voice at the end, and he turned his head away quickly. The poor fellow had been under a tremendous nervous strain—that was evident at a glance, and he looked as though he might collapse at any moment. A mouthful of brandy from my pocket-flask brought the color back to his cheek, and he was able to continue the recital of his own adventure with the master of the "yellow house."

After all, there was not much to tell. He had received a letter from Maître Vauclot—whom he knew slightly—asking him to call at the house in the Rue de Rennes on a matter of business, something in connection with the lease of his aunt's apartments. At noon on Saturday he had stopped at No. 82, on his way to his aunt's house, and had had a long interview with Vauclot. The pretended business had been quickly despatched, and then Vauclot had attempted to sound him in regard to his confidential relations in the Czareska household. There was one particular piece of information which he seemed most anxious to obtain, but, of course, Achille had both resented and resisted his impertinent inquiries. The struggle had been a protracted one, but Achille had managed to hold his own.

"But why a struggle at all?" I interrupted. "Why should you have submitted to cross-examination at the hands of this Devil's Advocate? You, a young man of five-and-twenty, with the muscles of an ox! I am ashamed for you, Achille."

"Ah, m'sieu, it may seem incredible, but under those eyes—you do not comprehend, but I could do nothing but sit there—a block of stone."

I nodded back at the poor fellow. Such hallucinations are not uncommon, and, by pretending to understand, the story would not be interrupted.

"And so at last they brought me up here. At least, m'sieu, the eyes had not made me betray my master. Maître Vauclot might steal away my legs, but he could not unlock my lips. This morning another two hours' interview, and it ended in precisely the same way. And that is all."

"Then you have been confined here since the early afternoon of Saturday?"

"That is it, m'sieu. And I have seen no one but that abominable Perroquet, who brings me my meals. An empty room, as you see; nothing to be afraid of in that, one would think. And yet every now and then the cold sweat comes out all over me. What do they do here in this room? What becomes of the people who once enter it? I have asked myself these questions a thousand times, but I get no answer. I am afraid, m'sieu, and that is the truth."

I made another careful survey of the room, but the blank walls told nothing. There was one peculiar feature, however, about the floor. It was of metal, like the walls and ceiling, and it was apparently divided into four triangular sections by diagonal lines running from the corners to the centre. What could be the object of this peculiar construction? Let us suppose that these four triangular sections are hinged at their bases to the wall. Now withdraw the support, whatever it may be, that holds up the centre, and what happens? The four wings drop, and the victim slowly slides down their sloping surfaces to finally disappear into—What? The room below? Perhaps into a chute running through those dark middle apartments into the cellars. And after that—an acid bath, a bed of quicklime, the sewers? I knelt down and scrutinized more closely this infamous trap. I fancied that I could see scratches upon the floor—the marks of finger-nails.

"This way, if m'sieu will be so kind." Achille was standing in a far corner of the room, and pointing to what seemed to be writing done upon the metal surface of the wall. It could only be seen at a certain angle of the light thrown by my dark-lantern—the words looked as though they might have been traced with the wetted head of a match. But once seen, the writing was plain enough to read:

J. GILLAUDET
June 27th
✝
Jésu pitié!

It was only after a determined effort of will that I again got the best of my jangling nerves. But there was work to be done, and the exigency itself helped at last to steady me. Achille could be of no use; the man was in a state of nervous collapse, and could not even walk without my assistance. He clung to me like a child, begging me not to abandon him, and for the moment I was at my wit's end. I had not the heart to leave him shut up in this dreadful room, and I could not run the risk of taking him down on one of the lower floors. Finally we compromised on the balcony of the room outside, where I myself had found a temporary refuge not long before. The night was warm, and he would suffer no discomfort from being in the open air.

Achille was willing to go anywhere so long as these horrible walls of metal did not shut him in. Without much trouble I lugged him out through the clothes-press, and got him safely stowed away upon the balcony. With a final assurance that I would return in an hour at the furthest, I drew down the long window and locked it. That would prevent his taking it into his head to disobey orders, and go roaming around on his own account. Not that it was a likely contingency, but one must look out for everything. And finally I shut and locked the clothes-press. Until he found his key, Perroquet would not be likely to discover the disappearance of his prisoner.

All was quiet in the house, and I made my way without difficulty to the middle room on the first floor, which, it will be remembered, communicated with both the office in the front and with the dining-room in the rear. The dinner was still waiting to be served, so I took my post at the glass doors commanding the front room. I could both see and hear perfectly, and I was determined that no scruples of delicacy should prevent me from picking up and appropriating any crumbs of knowledge that might fall within my reach.

It was a little after eight o'clock when the first of Maître Vauclot's guests arrived, and I almost betrayed myself as he entered the room, ushered by Perroquet. It was the Chevalier du Midi, and, by the character of the greetings exchanged, it was plain that he was on intimate terms with his host. The Chevalier's manner was excited, and he seemed annoyed that the other guest had not arrived. He walked impatiently up and down the room, and then stopped abruptly at his host's chair.

"It is nearly three months since the 'Cardinal's Rose' was placed in your keeping," he said, petulantly, "and yet nothing has been done. Where is the ruby? Let me see it."

"By all means," said Vauclot, turning to the cabinet-secretary.

There was a false panel back of a drawer that he proceeded to pull out, and the desk stood so near the glass doors that I had no difficulty in seeing the position of the spring. The panel flew, open, and disclosed a recess, from which Maître Vauclot took a small box that he handed to the young man. The Chevalier drew from the box a chamois-leather bag, and opened it eagerly. And I, looking with all my eyes, saw the great ruby at last, the glorious "Cardinal's Rose," with its heart of living flame. A king's ransom, mind you, and lying in the hollow of a man's hand!

"Superb! Magnificent!" and, as it were, we all started and looked up, to find Mr. Giles Coventry bending smilingly over the Chevalier's shoulder. The Chevalier turned on him quickly.

"All very well, Coventry, but what is being done, tell me that? Here is the 'Cardinal's Rose,' but where are the rifles, the machine guns, the supplies of medicine, of food, of ammunition?"

Mr. Coventry shrugged his shoulders. "We can't do everything in a day. Patience, my dear fellow."

"But you do nothing in three months," retorted the Chevalier. "It is always patience, patience, and mine has reached its limit. The revolution is flickering out like an unsnuffed candle, Jehan is growing stronger every day, and Soulia will soon be justified in interfering. Here is a million sterling locked up in this piece of red crystal, and you were instructed to realize upon it. Why have you not done so? The Chevalier du Midi would be pleased to have an explanation from Mr. Coventry."

Mr. Coventry was perfectly self-possessed, and with admirable coolness he proceeded to put the younger man completely in the wrong. Such a delicate piece of business could not be hurried; the "Cardinal's Rose" was not an ordinary piece of security upon which one might raise the cost of a dinner at the *Mont de Piété*. For all that, he had not been losing time, and the negotiation was even now about to be closed. The Littigs were cautious people, but they had virtually consented to the proposal of a loan, with the "Cardinal's Rose" as the pledge for the millions to be advanced. But it was a dangerous venture, and the indemnity would be enormous. Finally, he could assure M. le Chevalier that in two weeks' time a perfectly equipped army of fifty thousand men would be marching into Ætolia—that is, provided that the Chevalier du Midi continued to honor his friends with his entire confidence; otherwise Mr. Coventry would request permission to retire altogether.

The young man listened moodily to this harangue, but he offered no further remonstrance, and Perroquet now appeared, and intimated that dinner was served. Vauclot took the jewel, and carefully replaced it in the secret compartment of the cabinet; then, with a great show of deference, he motioned to the Chevalier that he should lead the way out. Like a sulky boy, du Midi obeyed, Vauclot and Coventry standing aside, and bowing as he passed. There was an irony of exaggerated respect in their attitudes, and I was not surprised to see Coventry look back, as he reached the door, and exchange a triumphant smile with the older man, who was bringing up the rear.

The night was warm, and as Coventry turned he drew his handkerchief with a careless hand across his forehead. And there, revealed by the full glare of the gas-light, was a glint of reddish hair under the smooth black locks that he wore plastered down so closely about his ears. This, then, was the final solution of the mystery that had puzzled me for so long. It was "Pompadour" who was the real man, it was Coventry who had worn the mask! A daring transposition of roles, but how cleverly it had been carried out! I blushed again to recall that mortifying encounter of two days before, in the Rue de Rennes, when the bird had escaped out of my very hand. Excellent, monsieur, but now we shall see what we shall see.

I waited only long enough to make sure, from my second point of vantage, that the party were safely seated at table with Perroquet in attendance. Then, still in my stockinged feet, I entered the front room, and stood beside the cabinet-secretary. The spring yielded to my touch, the little chamois-leather bag was in my hand, and then quickly transferred to my inside waistcoat-pocket. My task was accomplished; now I had only to go back after Achille, and I might take leave forever of Maître Vauclot and of the "yellow house." *L'homme propose.*

CHAPTER XI

MAÎTRE VAUCLOT DINES

IT was a full hour before I could get Achille in condition to be moved. My return had seemed to unman him completely; he lay on the slatted floor of the balcony, alternately laughing and sobbing, and there was nothing to do but to wait until the attack of hysteria had worn itself out. Once or twice I was on the point of forcibly gagging and trussing him up, but I dared not run the risk of the noise that must inevitably attend upon such a struggle. Expostulation, argument, command—all were alike useless, and I had to resign myself to the inevitable.

At last the fit passed, and the poor fellow became amenable to reason once more. But he was so weak that I had to half-carry him down the three flights of stairs, something of a task, for Achille was a well-built man. However, it was accomplished without mishap, and we finally stood safe in the court-yard below. There was only the street door to be passed, and the key was still in the lock—within the limit of fifty steps we might be walking down the Rue de Rennes.

The impulse was inexplicable, but it was nevertheless irresistible—I must have one parting look at Maître Vauclot's dinner-party. The risk was small, and it would take but a minute or so at the furthest. Assisting Achille to a seat on a bench, and promising to return immediately, I ran up to the first floor, and passed to my old point of vantage in the middle room. Dinner was over, for the coffee-pot stood at Maître Vauclot's hand, and Perroquet was filling the liqueur-glasses at the sideboard. Poor du Midi! It was evident that he had been drinking deeply; his eyes were set, and his head lolled helplessly to one side, as he lay back in the big leather-lined chair.

Coventry and Vauclot were talking earnestly, and the former had shifted his seat so that he could not see the Chevalier without turning his head. But Vauclot, I noticed, was keeping close watch upon the slight figure in the big chair. Suddenly Coventry tossed off his cognac, and pushed back from the table.

"We must be going," he said, shortly, and looked around at du Midi. And then, disgustedly: "Why, the man's drunk!" He jumped up and shook him violently by the shoulders. The young man made an apparent effort to pull himself together, and then sank back in the chair, inert and helpless.

"Deuce take it!" said Coventry, with open irritation. "And we had an engagement at the Jockey Club for ten o clock. Can't you give him something that will straighten him out?"

"Drunk as a lord," said Vauclot, cynically. He drew down the lower eyelid of the unconscious man, examining the pupil with a close scrutiny. "He's like a log now, and will be for ten hours to come. Leave him here with me for the night—you can make his excuses at the club, and sleep and rest will bring him around all right in the morning."

Coventry frowned, and hesitated, but there was clearly nothing else to be done, and he acquiesced sulkily.

"I'll give him my own room," said Vauclot, "and send him back to you to-morrow at any time you say."

"Well, you can tell him that I will be at his apartments by half after twelve. It's cursedly inconvenient for me, but there's no help for it, I suppose. I'll help you get him up-stairs, and then I must be off, or I shall miss my other man altogether. Open the door there, Perroquet."

There was not an instant to lose, and I slipped quietly into the hall, and down the staircase. The court-yard was empty; Achille had disappeared.

For a little while I stood irresolute. It was plain that Achille had become alarmed at my protracted absence, and had made his own way to the street. I glanced into the vaulted passage, and saw that the door stood ajar. I had only to follow, and I too should be clear of these ill-omened walls. Yes, and with the object of my mission successfully accomplished. Why was I waiting?

And yet I could not shut my eyes upon what I had already seen. After what I had learned of this hideous house, I could not leave du Midi behind me, above all, in his present helpless condition. The suspicion had been growing steadily in my mind that the boy had been drugged—there was more than mere intoxication in those abnormally dilated pupils that good Maître Vauclot had examined with so much interest. The commonest humanity would forbid the abandonment of a comrade under such circumstances, and du Midi had even established some claim upon my friendship. Little by little we had drifted into relations that were almost intimate. In spite of his patent weaknesses, I had grown really fond of the boy.

But even that consideration was neither here nor there, in view of what I had heard from mademoiselle's lips. Only a half confidence, but I had learned enough to realize that the safety and honor of the Chevalier du Midi were absolutely paramount in any contingency. My suspicions of Vauclot's good faith might be unfounded in this particular case, but could I dare to trust him after what I had seen and heard? Assuredly not.

Yet, after all, the natural and most feasible course of action was for me to gain the street and seek assistance from the police. There would be red tape in plenty, but I should break it, even if it were necessary to invoke aid from the Rue d'Alger. It was too bad, though, that Achille had not waited. I could then have made him my messenger, and been free to remain in the "yellow house" to forestall any possisible contingency. There would be two against one, but I was young and active and confident of holding my own even against force.

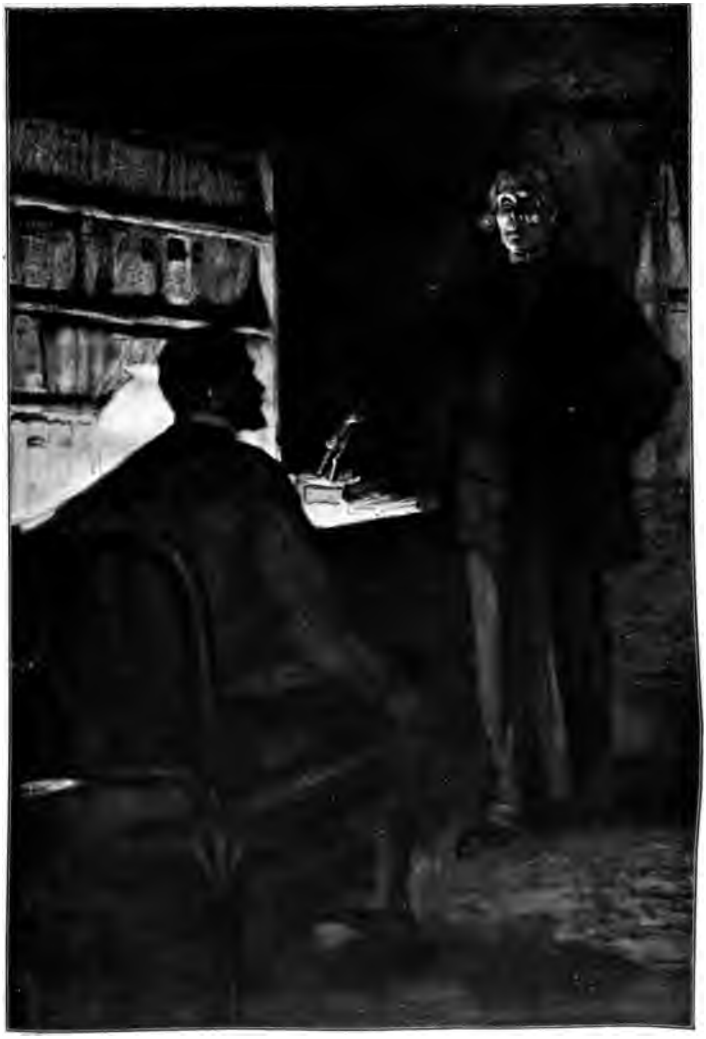
Rapidly as I had turned this over in my mind, I had delayed just a few seconds too long. I had walked over to the far end of the court-yard to see if I could make out anything at the windows, and before I realized my position, Perroquet and Coventry had entered the enclosure, and were between me and the street door. It was important that I should not be seen, so I crouched down behind a bench and held my breath. Afterwards I could let myself out, as Achille had done, and no one would be the wiser for my three hours' sojourn in the "yellow house."

It is always the unexpected. On this occasion Perroquet did not leave the door-key in the lock, but carried it away with him. I could see it swinging at the end of his finger, as he emerged from the passage and shuffled slowly across the court-yard. I was trapped, and in my vexation I involuntarily snapped my fingers. The noise could make no difference, but the motion, slight as it was, attracted the attention of those lynx-like eyes. Holding the lantern aloft, he came straight towards my wretched apology for a hiding-place.

There was but one thing to do, and I sprang straight at him. Taken as he was at a disadvantage, and an old man, too, I was quickly made aware that I had a big piece of work cut out for me. So strong was he on his legs that he all but succeeded in recovering his balance; but I had tackled him low and hard, and the shock carried him just a trifle too far. Dropping his lantern, he wound both of his long ape-like arms about my neck. I felt the muscles of my jaw relax, and my tongue fell out helplessly; I was suffocating, dying. Then we went down with a crash, Perroquet being underneath. He quivered and lay still, stunned by the crack that his head had received from its contact with the stone flagging of the court-yard. Panting and confused, I managed to extricate myself from that hideous embrace, and scrambled to my feet. Six feet away stood Maître Vauclot, and I was looking straight into the muzzle of the brown pistol-barrel that lay along the hollow of his arm.

I found myself vaguely wondering why he did not fire. Perhaps he had already done so, and the bullet was even now in my brain, in my heart. Strange that I did not fall! How long does it take a man to die with a leaden ball in his head? One by one the moments passed, and then the cloud that fogged my brain lifted, and I knew that I was still waiting. The eyes that stared into mine suddenly hardened; the notary had recognized me.

"Ah, my young friend who corresponds with his sister in Alsace! This is twice to-day that you are in my house. Well, you are persistent, and perhaps you



"GOD! HE WAS PUTTING OUT HIS HAND"

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had better stay altogether. See! I have but to crook my finger, so."

"By all means," I retorted. "The report will be the signal for your own destruction. My friends are not far off."

"Wrong again, my dear sir; an air-pistol makes no noise. But stand up there," and he eyed me, cocking his head from side to side, as though he were a connoisseur about to pass judgment upon a doubtful antique. Then he spoke calmly, deliberately:

"Perhaps, after all, you have some interesting information to give me—secrets of your own, eh? Certainly you show great persistence in prying into mine."

There was no possible reply for me to make. His tone of polite irony never wavered as he went on:

"You had your warning, and you refused to profit by it. Very well, monsieur, we shall be well acquainted before we part. Understand, too, that when I propose to know a man, I am accustomed to look well below the surface. I am not content with externals, and so I cut, I dig, I probe—I find the real man; I lay him before me as though I were his God. Ah, you comprehend my meaning; we are beginning to know each other already—that is good."

The heap of clothes that was Perroquet stirred, and he groaned feebly. His master kicked at him with deliberate and intelligent directness; there is a nerve ganglion at the point of the elbow that can be touched with effect by one who knows where to find it. The wretch started up as though he had received an electric shock.

"Quick! you pig, and give us a light ahead there. Now, monsieur, if you will be so good."

Arrived at the office, I was motioned to a chair, and Vauclot seated himself at the big table, with the pis-

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tol lying within easy reach of his hand. I waited—not that I feared the chance of a bullet, but because there were other interests than my own life at stake. When I did make my spring, I must be reasonably sure of the ground under me. I kept my eyes upon my captor's face; I paid no attention to the questions that he put to me; I hoped that my contemptuous indifference might annoy him—that it might draw him off his guard for the one precious moment that I wanted. An admirable idea, was it not? But listen.

The next time you go to the Zoo make your way to the great bird-cage where the birds of prey—the eagles, the falcons, the vultures—blink sleepily on their perches. Poke at one of them with your umbrella, and notice how the bird receives the insult. You will see the pupils visibly dilating, and the filmy inner eyelid drawing back all around the circle. That is the nictitating membrane through which he looks at the sun, and only opens when he desires to paralyze his prey.

Have I spoken before of the brilliant, changeful, hawk-like eyes under the white thatch of those cavernous eyebrows? I saw them now bent full upon me; the outer lids had widened to their utmost, exposing the grayish membrane that lay beneath them. The next instant this inner veil had parted, and I was looking into the pit.

From where I sat it seemed an infinite distance to the big table. I saw my adversary rise from his chair and come towards me, but I was not alarmed—it would be millions of years before he would be near enough to touch me, and I should have plenty of time in which to slip aside, to run away.

Fool that I was! I had forgotten how fast he walked; already an eternity had passed, my last yard of vantage had been swallowed up—God! He was putting out his hand—

But that final step was never taken. He stopped short, with his head thrust far forward, and as he listened, his delicately pointed ears quivered and stood erect, as though controlled by the flexible aural muscles belonging to the lower animals. It was not a human being, but a wild beast trapped, upon which I looked. The torpor which had benumbed my brain and paralyzed my limbs had passed away, but for the moment I went physically sick. Upon whose voice had Maître Vauclot deemed it well to wait?

And then upon my duller senses smote the vibrations of a sound, penetrating and compelling. Then it came again, sliding upward, through discordant intervals, to a nerve-shaking shriek, and then dropping back to its fundamental bass. The roar of the lion in his jungle, the crash of elemental discords—these are indeed awe-inspiring, but after all they are definite, material, self-limited. It was the human quality thrilling through the mighty crescendo of this unknown sound that stilled the pulse and loosened the knees of him who listened. It was the voice of the people, thick, savage, and confused; the merciless note of the wild beast that dares to utter his cry only when men are no longer men, but only units in that formless, monstrous thing which we call the mob. And we three who listened drew close together, and our hands touched; for one brief moment we were conscious only of one common humanity, and of one common peril. And so we waited.

CHAPTER XII

THE WOLF AT THE DOOR

IT was Vauclot's wit that first recovered its keen edge, and was ready to strike back at the enemy as yet invisible and unknown. With one spring he had gained the window overlooking the street, and I was at his side as he threw it up. The thoroughfare was black with people, surging hither and thither, and yet controlled by one definite and accepted purpose. Already blows were falling upon the street entrance to the "yellow house" —men beating upon the iron-studded oak with their bare fists, unmindful of lacerated knuckles and broken nails.

"Bring axes!" was the cry, caught up and repeated by a hundred throats, and a score of men on the outer fringe of the crowd started off on the run.

The meaning of the situation was not difficult to read. Undoubtedly Achille had told his story, and a spark runs quickly through tinder. There are occasions upon which the law's delay may seem intolerably unrighteous to the people, in whose name all judgment must be given. At such a time it is every man's duty to see that justice is done.

"Remember our friend Berger!" shouted some one deep in the crowd, and again that terrifying assent went up into the darkening sky. And then, forcing her way to the front, came a woman for whom the throng made way with cheers and laughter. Bareheaded, and with a man's coat flung carelessly across her shoulders, she came to claim her post in the forefront as a natural right—for this was Mlle. Agathe, a redoubtable woman and maternal aunt to my poor Achille. In her hand was a pannier filled with a colorless liquid. Petroleum, I guessed, and rightly—perhaps she had learned how to use it in those wild days of 1870.

Maître Vauclot had turned, and was talking on his fingers to Perroquet. The deaf mute nodded, and left the room.

"The police?" I said, inquiringly.

"Bah!" he answered, shortly. "It will be twenty minutes before they come at all, and then they will do nothing. But if Perroquet can get the grating into place I will snap my fingers at the assassins. And for a second string, there is the iron door at the bottom of the staircase. Kindly hold the light for me while I secure it."

I took a candle from one of the wall sconces and stood on the landing, while Vauclot descended the stairs and closed and bolted the iron-plated door leading into the court-yard. If the mob did succeed in forcing the outer entrance, this barrier should keep them busy for at least a quarter of an hour longer.

We went back into the office, and I opened one of the rear windows looking upon the court-yard and leaned out. I was surprised to see Perroquet there, and it was only then that I understood what his master had meant by getting the grating into place. I now saw that the deaf-mute was hard at work upon a pair of iron gates that were intended to protect the inner entrance of the vaulted passage leading to the street. Evidently they had not been used for a long time, for the hinges were rusty, and desperately hard to move. Already there was a thunder of blows upon the outer or street door—the axes must have arrived at last, and Perroquet would have to be quick. I ran to the opposite window. The axes were biting deeply into the solid oak door, and the splinters were flying bravely. It was only a matter of seconds now.

Again I was at the inner window, and, forgetting all about the deaf-mute's infirmity, I shouted at him that the wolves were even now breaking through. God in heaven! How slowly the man works. And yet if he cannot get the gates closed in time, he at least is lost, for by the closing of the iron door his amiable master has cut off his only line of retreat.

In my excitement I had thrown the window wide open, and was leaning far out over the sill. The sweep of the tragedy had already included me in its forward movement; I was no longer the mere spectator, the casual looker-on. Bravery, even in an evil cause, must always command a man's sympathy, and for the moment I was heart and soul upon the side of that silent figure, working single-handed against all the powers of darkness and of death. Scoundrel and brute as I knew him to be, I could not harden myself into indifference as I watched and waited. Whatever else a brave man may be, he is the hero only at the supreme moment.

Even now it seemed possible that he might succeed. From the noise in the street I knew that the outer door must be shaking on its hinges, but Perroquet had at last succeeded in starting the refractory gate. With one last effort of strength he swung the two leaves together; he had only to slip the bolt into place and he was safe. But that, too, was rusty, and for a second or so it resisted his efforts; then it moved, it had almost reached its socket—

A plunge and a roar, and the human wave had broken through. There was a little eddy around the spot where Perroquet had but just now stood alone, and I caught one glimpse of an arm thrown upward. There was nothing more to see, and yet I shut my eyes.

Now the whirlpool had disappeared, and the crowd, as though moved by a common impulse, separated to either side. A vacant space; nothing there but a tiny fragment of an old velveteen coat. And yet Perroquet had been a stout man in his day.

A big butcher, who stood directly under the gas flare, bent forward and wiped his hands upon Mlle. Agathe's coarse black hair; she looked back at him and smiled.

"At your service, neighbor," she said, good-humoredly, "but you are too particular, seeing that the work is only just begun. Hallo! up there."

The sea of white faces seemed to rise up to meet me; in another moment I should have fallen into the abyss. But a strong hand drew me back.

"*Fi donc!* my young man," said Vauclot, irritably. "Are you then so enamored with manhandling that you desire to experiment with it in person? Let the swine rend each other," he concluded, contemptuously, as the court-yard re-echoed with execrations. "It is their amusement and our opportunity."

"Our opportunity?" I repeated, mechanically.

"We are in the same boat now," he said, coolly. "These fellows make no distinction between fur and feather, when once their blood is up, and I advise you to keep well out of sight. One moment, now, and I shall be ready," and he turned again to the pile of papers that he was swiftly sorting out upon the big table.

It was true enough, what he said. The mob, in their unreason, would take no accounting of their vengeance until it was finally completed. My presence in the "yellow house" was a sufficient death-warrant in itself; not even Achille could save me, did I fall alive into those greedy outstretched hands.

The methodical Maître Vauclot made up his papers into a bundle, and thrust them into an inside pocket. Then he looked up at me.

"The iron door gives us fifteen minutes grace, for they will have to send for a dynamite cartridge. If you want to save your skin, you had better follow me implicitly."

The blind instinct of self-preservation was upon me, and I stepped forward, ready to do the bidding of this stronger will. Then I stopped short, weighed down by that curious sense of something forgotten, of duty left undone. There was something, somebody else—du Midi! Ah, now it all comes back, clearing my brain of its cobweb of horrors and making a man of me again. The air-pistol still lay on the table; I picked it up and held it ready for use. Vauclot turned at the moment, and our eyes met. Then he stepped back a pace or two. It was my turn, and he knew it.

"You need my assistance to insure your escape," I said, coming close to him. "You shall have it, but only upon conditions, and first: Where is the Chevalier du Midi?"

"In my own room, the back one on the second floor. But the man is a helpless burden, you are only throwing away your own chance."

"I will be the judge of that," I answered, briefly. "Lead on!" and I fingered the trigger-guard suggestively.

We found the Chevalier still dressed, and lying upon the outside of the bed. He was in a deep sleep, and it was impossible to rouse him. The opiate must have been a powerful one, and it would probably retain its effects for several hours to come.

"What is your plan?" I asked.

"A rope-ladder," he answered. "The ell of the house runs clear to the Rue du Vieux Colombier, and it is not likely that any one will be on guard there."

"Where is the ladder?"

"It is intended to be lowered through a window of the attic-room on the top floor. The reel is heavy, and I cannot manage it alone."

I bent over the unconscious form of the young man, and slewed it around so that I could get my hands under his arm-pits.

"Take his feet," I ordered, curtly. I waited until Vauclot had obeyed, and then thrust the pistol into a pocket and assumed my end of the burden. We moved forward a few steps.

"It is impossible," said the old man, sullenly. "I have not the strength—"

A thunderous crash re-echoed through the house. The door must have given way, and the wolves were even now in possession. Confused cries and the sound of heavy, hurrying feet filled our ears. My unwilling ally made no further objection, and we started off with our load, a dead weight of one hundred and sixty pounds, and no joke even for young muscles. I was glad enough to stop for a moment on the next landing, while Vauclot was unlocking the door of the enclosed stairway leading to the attic floor.

This last flight was heart-breaking, the stairs being unusually narrow and having a double turn in them. But at last we made it, the first step on the road to safety. Vauclot looked ready to collapse, and I had to help him to a chair and give him a mouthful of brandy to hearten him. It would be several minutes before he would be able to move, and in the meantime I might be learning something about the movements of the enemy. I went down the last flight of steps, unlocked the door at the bottom, and listened attentively.

So far as I could make out the mob were still engaged in the agreeable occupation of looting the first-floor rooms. But at any moment a straggler might appear, and the avenger of blood would not be far behind him. It would not take long to search those empty rooms on the second and third floors, and I concluded that, with or without Vauclot's assistance, I had not an instant to lose. I was up the stairs again in a couple of bounds, but of my two companions only the unconscious du Midi remained. Maître Vauclot had disappeared.

There was no time to speculate upon the mystery of his desertion. In one corner of the room a large closet had been built out, and this I found to be locked. In all probability it was intended to mask the window through which the rope-ladder ran, and my treacherous ally might even now be making his escape. I pounded upon the door, and then tried to break it down. Impossible, for it was strongly made, and the lock held firmly. And even if I could have found instruments with which to batter my way in, the operation would have taken too much time, and would have made too much noise.

Now I had not entered upon this adventure of the "yellow house" without taking the precautions that were obvious and within my reach. Chief among them was the patent fire-escape rope which I wore coiled about my waist, and which was concealed by my outer garments from ordinary observation. This rope was of silk, and weighed but a few ounces. But it was guaranteed to support a weight of seven hundred pounds. The operator stood with his feet in a sort of stirrup, and regulated the speed of his descent by means of a friction-clutch attached to a pulley-block. The mechanism was ingenious and effective, and I need hardly add that it was the invention of one of my own countrymen. I had brought it with me from New York—for years I had never travelled anywhere without it.

Having unwound the rope, and put it into working order, I went to the other window in the room that commanded the Rue du Vieux Colombier, and tried to measure with my eye the distance to the pavement. It looked pretty far down, but when I had secured and dropped the rope it seemed to me that the end was not more than five or six feet short of the ground. Of course I should have to chance it; it was only the difficulty of dealing with du Midi that bothered me.

Army surgeons have the knack of carrying a wounded man at the least expenditure of sheer strength, and I had learned the trick from a friend in the service. I managed to get du Midi hoisted on my shoulders, where he lay inert as a bag of grain, and then, with a sheet that I had brought up from the bedroom, I managed to secure him so that I might have my hands free to work the clutch that controlled the speed of our descent. Fortunately the window was cut down low, and I succeeded at the first attempt in getting my feet into the sling of the stirrup. That done, I had only to swing off into space.

The simple but effective mechanism worked admirably, and our united weight of three hundred pounds and odd was well within the factor of safety. Down we went until we were nearly on a level with the first-story windows. And this was as far as we could go;

the rope was that much too short. I looked below. It was fully ten feet to the pavement—not too much of a drop had I been unencumbered, but impossible under the present circumstances. With du Midi's dead weight added to my own, the least consequent of such a fall would be a broken limb, and disablement would be fatal to our chance of finally getting away. And the street was absolutely deserted—no help there.

Lights were gleaming now from all the windows of the "yellow house," and every nook and corner buzzed as with a swarm of angry bees. At any moment we might be discovered, and again I measured the distance to the ground. If the drop must be made, it would be better to take it separately rather than together. The Chevalier would have to take his chances, but, relieved of his weight, I might be able to reach the ground without a broken bone.

Fending myself away from the wall, I managed to shift du Midi's body so that I could get at the knot of my improvised sling of bed-sheeting. It had tightened viciously under the strain, but at last I managed to start it; patience now, and I should succeed.

There was the sound of a window-sash being quietly opened, and, glancing up, I saw the big butcher at the second-story window immediately above our heads. He wasted no words, but struck savagely at me with a meat-knife, leaning far out over the sill. But we were hanging at least four feet lower than his window, and he could not reach me, try as he would. In his vexation he made as though he would fling the weapon at my head; but there was a surer way of accomplishing his purpose, and he was quick to see it.

The rope was swinging within arm's-length, and, reaching out, he drew it towards him and began hacking at it with his knife. It looked as though the Chevalier and I would go down together, after all.

The knot still resisted my fingers, and although the butcher's knife was dull, his perseverance would undoubtedly be rewarded in due time. But again it was not to be.

At every window of the stories above us there were faces crowded close together, and staring intently at the drama in the air that was being enacted for their amusement. The butcher saw them, and stopped his sawing on the rope—a sweeter triumph might yet be his.

"Pull them up, my brothers!" he shouted, with a flourish of the knife. "I have my sickle ready for the harvest, but the rye grows short this year. That's it; together, my children!"

The rope tightened, but the ruffians were so crowded together that their zeal only served to hamper their efforts. The butcher made a pass at my head, but the rope had sagged again, and he missed me by a bare half-inch.

"Let Stephan take the Chevalier," came from below, in the coolly measured voice of mademoiselle. I looked down and saw that a coach had been driven up on the sidewalk and directly under our point of suspension. Mademoiselle herself was standing at the door of the carriage, and under her direction the footman had taken up his position on the coach-roof, and was ready to receive my insensible burden.

"Quick, Mr. Cary"—and mademoiselle stamped her little foot imperiously. To the feminine mind, a man's wits seem to act with intolerable slowness at such a time, and yet I am sure that I did not lose the fractional part of a second in passing down du Midi into Stephan's strong arms and following on my own account. There was a disappointed yell from above, and the big knife came whirling down, and stuck quivering in the coach-roof. The horses made a forward plunge, and the wheels of the carriage jolted heavily over the curb. But Samson quickly had the animals in hand, and the next instant we were all safe upon the ground.

Mrs. Verriker was seated in the coach, her face as impassible as ever, and her thin lips set in straight, rigid lines. Yet she assisted us in propping up the unconscious man in a corner of the carriage, and even offered the use of her smelling-salts. I fairly lifted mademoiselle to her place, and jumped to the box-seat. At the corner of the Rue de Rennes torches were gleaming, and a score of dark forms were dashing towards us. The coach was already in motion, but one stone reached its mark and smashed a side-lamp. Samson drew his whip-lash along the flanks of his horses, and they broke into the gallop.

"Look behind, m'sieu," said Stephan. I turned. A gigantic mushroom cloud of smoke was forming above the roof of the "yellow house," and a tongue of flame shot out from a window.

It was long past midnight when we reached the Rue d'Alger, but the General was still at work in the library. With Stephan's help I managed to get the Chevalier up to his room and put him to bed. He was sleeping now in a perfectly natural manner, and would be quite himself by morning. I should have been glad enough to seek my own bed, but I had another duty to perform.

Mademoiselle had joined her father in the library, and was standing at the fireplace, drawing off her gloves. I walked up without a word, and gave her the little leather bag that I had taken from the secret drawer of Maître Vauclot's cabinet. Her delicately pencilled eyebrows contracted inquiringly.

"Open it," I said, triumphantly, and the General got up from his chair and came over to where we were standing.

Mademoiselle drew out the shagreen leather case, and her hand shook as she prepared to touch the spring. The cover flew back, and there lay the "Cardinal's Rose," blazing like a live coal in the rays of the argand burner. With an inarticulate cry the General seized the jewel and pressed it to his lips. Then he held out his hand to me.

"Yes; we are indebted to Mr. Cary," assented mademoiselle, smilingly.

She took the jewel from her father's hand and looked at it long and searchingly. And then it suddenly slipped from her fingers, and, rolling across the rug, lay on the hearthstone. The heavy fire-bar was at mademoiselle's hand, and before either of us could stir, she had poised and let it fall point downward. The great ruby, shattered into a hundred fragments, lay destroyed upon the hearthstone; the "Cardinal's Rose" was no longer in existence.

CHAPTER XIII

I GO OUT TO SERVICE

IT seemed a long time before any one even moved. The General's face was purple.

"Irma!" he said, thickly; then he fell back in a chair and plucked at his collar.

"*Article de Paris*," returned mademoiselle, with the utmost serenity; "or, if you prefer, just plain colored glass."

"What!" roared the General. He knelt down on the hearth, examining the glittering fragments one by one, while I wondered if I looked as foolish as I felt.

"She is quite right, Cary," said the General, at last. "Nothing but a clever imitation. And now, what does it all mean?"

Truly the mystery of the "Cardinal's Rose" seemed further than ever from a solution. For whose benefit had Mr. Giles Coventry played his little farce? Had I been his dupe, then, from the very beginning? No; that could not be, and I read the same answer in mademoiselle's eyes. Unquestionably the false jewel had been prepared to deceive du Midi alone. Mr. Coventry had evidently wanted time in which to pull his chestnuts out of the fire, and it was necessary to keep the young man quiet.

But of all this, not a word to the General. The honor of the Chevalier was to be guarded as a possession even more precious than that of the "Cardinal's Rose" itself. Mademoiselle had taught me my lesson; I must take the blunder upon my own shoulders.

"I have been stupid, General," I said, as easily as I could. "The rascals must have realized that I was after them hot-foot, and they threw this out on the chance of delaying me. However that may be, we have at least established one certainty—the double-dealing of Coventry. The fact that the counterfeit stone was found in his virtual possession is presumptive evidence that he knows where the real one is. The clew lies there, even if the 'Cardinal's Rose' is missing," and I pointed to the fragments of ruby glass scattered over the hearth.

"One moment, Mr. Cary," returned the General, and his voice was full of a hard suspicion. "You forget that I have only your bare word for Mr. Coventry's share in this affair. It was from your hand, and not from his, that I received the false ruby; and in the absence of any other evidence than your own story, am I not justified in concluding that the onus must at least be shared between you?"

Admirable logic this, but somewhat embarrassing. I looked over at mademoiselle.

"It is true that neither has fully succeeded in clearing himself," she said, slowly; "but if we must choose between them, it will be better to give our confidence to Mr. Cary.

"But Coventry already knows—"

"Too much," finished his daughter, calmly. "Finally, we have Mr. Cary's parole, and we know that it means something to him, or he need never have returned at all to the Rue d'Alger. As for Mr. Coventry, his only passport is his friendship with the Chevalier, and there was a Judas among the apostles. Decidedly, we must give Mr. Cary our confidence—if he is willing to accept it."

"But why should we treat with either of them," demanded the General, impatiently. "Surely, the fewer the better."

"Precisely, but we are now one short of the few. Michael has broken his leg. The stupid got in the way of an automobile this morning, and was taken to a hospital."

"And you propose?"

"That Mr. Cary shall assume Michael's role in our little comedy. Have you ever been out at service, Mr. Cary? No! that is unfortunate, since the best of references are required. However, I dare say we shall be able to arrange all that, and now, if you please, give me your entire attention."

"To-morrow morning Vital will bring you a suit of dark clothes suitable to your new condition, and you will allow him to shave off both your beard and your mustache. At ten o'clock you will present yourself in this room ready to assume your duties as a footman in the household of Baron Kerker."

"But, mademoiselle—"

"No objections, Mr. Cary. These are your orders from your superior officer, and your part is to obey—not to question them. Still, you are entitled to some explanations, and M. le Général will be happy to satisfy your reasonable curiosity. Your mission will be a delicate one, but you will succeed; indeed, I will accept nothing less than success. Come, monsieur, are you not even acquainted with the elementary duties of your new profession; do you not see that I am waiting for you to open the door?"

As I lie awake in bed, staring up at the ceiling, I go over in my mind the story that the General has just imparted to me. In a few words, then, the Chevalier du Midi is none other than Prince Infelix, the rightful King of Ætolia, and the General is that same Count de Czareska who was prime minister to Basil IX. After the unlucky campaign that ended with the defeat at Sarkis, Soulian intrigue brought about the usurpation of Jehan, and Basil Agricola fled to England, where he died. All this happened twenty years ago, when Infelix was a child in his nurse's arms. General Czareska was appointed legal guardian to the young prince, and the exiles lived quietly near London, waiting—waiting for a chance to strike back at the rebels and traitors who ruled Ætolia from the steps of the Soulian throne. And all these years the faithful at home had kept in constant communication with their expatriated leaders. Loyalty dies hard among the granite hills of Ætolia, and the Agricola must some day come to his own again. So much for past history.

It was in January of this year that the Prince attained his majority, and, depending upon favorable advices from Ætolia, General Czareska determined that the time had come for a forward step. The first move was to Paris, and the work of reorganizing the revolutionary party began at once.

We are now at the last of June, and the work is well advanced. Arms and supplies have been distributed throughout Ætolia, plans of campaign have been formulated, and at any time the word may be given. With General Czareska at the head of the army, and the young Prince riding at his side, the country-side is expected to rise at the first notes of the bugle. To strike as swiftly and as hard as possible is the aim of the Legitimist leaders, and, indeed, the success of the movement depends almost entirely upon its celerity, as may be easily shown.

Nominally, Ætolia is a tributary to Soulia, but under the treaty of Naples it retains its autonomy, and Soulia is only entitled to interfere under circumstances of extraordinary emergency. The usurper Jehan is completely under Soulian influence, and does everything in his power to further Soulian interests. In return, he enjoys the open friendship and protection of the Caliph, to the infinite disgust of the vast majority of his own subjects.

Supposing, now, that the revolution in favor of the deposed Agricolas is fairly under way, it is evident that Jehan will look to Soulia for aid. But war costs money, and every money-lender in Europe knows just how much the Caliph's note-of-hand is worth. Everybody knows, again, that the Soulian army pay is six months in arrears, and that there is discontent everywhere. Unless Soulia can succeed in floating a fresh loan, it will be impossible for her to extend any material aid to Jehan. But she will do her utmost to get that money; Soulia knows that it will be well expended in keeping Jehan on the throne, for there is many a fat chicken to be had for the plucking in the Ætolian tax budget, and Soulian hands are always itching.

And so the fate of Ætolia lies in the hands of the money-brokers. If Soulia's support can be rendered nugatory through the refusal of the money-barons to loosen their purse-strings, why, then the revolution has an excellent fighting chance. But once let Soulia get her loan, and we may as well take off our orange-and-black cockades and go home, without waiting for the green curtain. The Ætolian revolutionary army, which is being recruited in the vicinity of Kar, will be barely superior in numbers to Jehan's mercenaries, and decidedly inferior in equipment. With Soulia at his back, Jehan must win.

This explains, then, why the Czareska party are still staying on in Paris. The agents of Soulia are also here, and up to this time they have been thwarted at every turn by our counter-manipulation of the financial sponge. And in the mean time the revolutionary movement is gaining strength with every hour that goes by; our last advices are to the effect that the fiery torch may be started on its travels within the next ten days. Soulia must get the money within that time, or it will come too late.

Now there is but one regularly qualified financial practitioner in all Europe, and that man is, of course, Baron Kerker, head of the banking-house of Kerker & Company, in the Rue de la Banque. But although the Baron is accustomed to being called in to attend upon desperate cases, no one has ever accused him of doing anything for the sick man without the customary *quid pro quo*. He has the money, but he will not lend it to Soulia without proper security, and he will want something better than a third or fourth lien upon the monstrously encumbered revenues of the empire. Unquestionably the Baron will have his pound of flesh duly cut off and delivered at his door before he will advance a franc upon it. Sentiment cuts no figure in his business, and this fact is in our favor. But let the pledge be forthcoming, and the pawn-broker will not hesitate. Can Soulia produce the security, and within these ten days? There lies the danger.

Of course we have provided, so far as possible, for every contingency. We have our agents everywhere, even in the counting-room of Kerker & Company, and we can be sure of knowing everything that happens there. But the Baron is a clever man, and this is not the kind of business that may be openly transacted on the Bourse. Moreover, there is always a side-door to all the establishments that bear the three golden balls as their trade emblem. Fashionable clients do not care to stand in the common stalls, and rub shoulders with the miserable creatures who ask humbly for a few sous upon the family bedstead. People who have diamonds and sables which they wish to store at the *Mont de Piété* are received in the drawing-room, and there is always a glass of wine to celebrate the conclusion of the business. It would be a grave oversight to think that Baron Kerker leaves all business cares behind him when he drives away from the Rue de la Banque every afternoon at four. In his magnificent residence on the Champs-Élysées there is a certain room which the Baron jocularly calls his "Petite Bourse," and many a financial lance has been broken within its heavily padded and sound-proof walls. Finally Michael, who has been on guard duty in the Kerker household, is incapacitated, and mademoiselle has ordered me to take his place in wearing the Kerker livery. I dislike the role to which I have been assigned; I will protest against it—in the morning.

I am almost ashamed to write it down, but when I did meet Mademoiselle in the morning, I was clean shaven and attired in that beastly suit of undertaker's black that is also the badge of respectable domestic servitude. Somehow mademoiselle's little hands are masterful instruments for the moulding of men's wills to her liking, and I forgot all about my protest. I only knew that I was to serve her, and I was happy in being chosen to do her will. I had been dealing with situations, and now I was about to take one—a trifling difference after all.

Mademoiselle was in high spirits when I presented myself for my final instructions. She complimented me upon my get-up, and was good enough to add that

I looked stupid enough to deceive anybody, and should make an admirable lackey. If all went well, and I cared to continue in the profession, something would certainly be found for me at the Ætolian court. I might even aspire to becoming major-domo of the palace at Kar.

"One moment, mademoiselle. You gave me to understand, distinctly, that if I went to the 'yellow house' I must not look for any assistance from you. How did it happen, then, that you were on hand at the critical time?"

"The explanation is very simple, Mr. Cary. I had been attending one of Madame St. Just's Sunday evening musicales, and we were on our way home—that is all."

"But the Rue du Vieux Colombier," I persisted, rashly, "is hardly on the direct route between the Boulevard St.-Germain and the Rue d'Alger."

"My way, monsieur, is the one that suits me. Do I make myself understood?"

She swept from the room like a veritable queen, and I stood gazing blankly after her with my air-castles tumbling about my ears. I had been fool enough to think that she had cared, that it had made some difference—I knew better now. I had simply been deceiving myself, and at last my eyes were open. True, they smarted a little, but then some of the dust from my fallen castles may have gotten into them, or else I had been looking too long at the sun. Well, it was only another page turned down, and I must not forget the duty to which I had been assigned, and which I must still perform, to the utmost of my ability. I called a cab, and gave the driver the address of Baron Kerker on the Champs-Élysées.

CHAPTER XIV

THE "PETITE BOURSE"

IT was on Monday that I entered the household service of Baron Kerker, and to-day is Wednesday. I encountered no difficulty whatever in the preliminary formalities of my engagement; it was evident that mademoiselle had spun her threads in every possible direction. Of course I made blunders at first, and I must learn to keep my eyes down, and to walk without clattering my heels. And yesterday I forgot to warm the *Figaro* before handing it to the Baron, and was called an imbecile in consequence.

As situations go, I ought to be well content. I am excellently housed and fed, and I find that the reputation of the Kerker establishment stands high in the world below stairs. A good home and a generous master—what more can be desired?

This master of ours is worth studying. He belongs body and soul to that curious social class, the *haute finance*, and it is a type that is differentiated sharply in these days of specialization. Perhaps the line of cleavage can be more easily traced here in the Old World than on our side of the water, where we are all supposed to be men of affairs.

In appearance the Baron is short and stout, and he would be vulgar-looking except for certain lines about the mouth and temples. Perhaps they are the rulings of his great ledger metaphysically reproduced, but he will be a shrewd observer who undertakes to read what is written on them. For the rest, he has splendid white teeth, and it follows naturally that his chef is said to be the best in all Paris.

It is an odious reflection that my business in this house is that of a spy, and I shall be glad when my probation is over. Still, I am not reduced to the humiliating necessity of vulgar eavesdropping, and, indeed, ordinary methods would be useless here, for the thick door of the Baron's private den has no keyhole, and no one enters, upon any pretext, when he is receiving clients. And yet we get our regular daily bulletins, as you shall hear.

It is most ingeniously contrived—that arrangement of a phonographic apparatus within the tall clock that stands in the Baron's study, otherwise the "Petite Bourse." The clock is wound up every morning, and the duty has been specially assigned to me. It is then the easiest thing in the world to remove the waxen roll upon which the record is made and to substitute a fresh one. And while the Baron is at dinner, every night, I have an opportunity to slip in and start the machine for its evening's work. The ticking of the clock covers up the click, click of the mechanism, and you may be assured that the wonderful little needle will not miss the faintest vibration of a sound wave during the five or six hours that the room may be occupied.

Monday night the Baron had a large dinner-party, and he did not even enter the "Petite Bourse." When I took the record to the hotel in the Rue d'Alger the next morning, and it was run through the talking-machine, we heard only the chiming of the hours from the big clock. Tuesday night the Baron had a visitor, and they talked for three hours about—rose culture. It was tiresome work to listen to it the next day, and mademoiselle, in despair, finally snatched the waxen cylinder from the machine, and announced her intention of practising the black art upon the uncommunicative financier; whereupon she stuck it full of small pins and set it down on the fire-place to melt slowly away. It may have been merely a coincidence, but that evening the Baron complained of having had a frightful indigestion all day—literally on pins and needles, as he expressed it.

But to-day is Wednesday, and I have high hopes, for the Baron is dining *à deux*, and his guest is none other than Mr. Giles Coventry. For two mortal hours I have been standing behind his chair, while he has been enjoying an excellent dinner, and amusing the Baron with a succession of capital stories. Some of them are mine, by the way—real American jokes—but Mr. Coventry tells them well, and I should like to laugh at them myself. And now they have retired into the "Petite Bourse," and, after carrying in the cordials and coffee, I return to my post at the bottom of the grand staircase. Perhaps this time we shall hear something, if only Mr. Edison's little wheels continue to go round.

It was long after midnight when I was ordered to call Mr. Coventry's carriage. He seemed to be in excellent humor, and whistled softly a bar or two of "*Malbrouck s'en va à la guerre*," as I assisted him with his overcoat. Suddenly he turned and looked me straight in the eyes. I did not flinch, but I could see that the lines about his mouth puckered up oddly, as though he were trying to suppress an amused smile. And then, after staring hard at me for perhaps half a minute, he deliberately took a twenty-franc piece from his waistcoat pocket and held it out. It was a bad moment, but luckily I retained enough presence of mind to take the coin with an appropriate expression of gratitude, and Mr. Coventry, after favoring me with a final grimace, stepped into his carriage and was whirled away. Had he recognized me? It seemed probable; and yet, why should he hold his hand if he were really certain of my identity? For good and sufficient reasons, no doubt, and I dare say that I shall learn of them before long.

I waited impatiently for the Baron to retire to his own room, and so give me the opportunity of examining the trap. At last he was off, and I was quickly in the "Petite Bourse." It was mortifying to discover that the mechanism had run down, and that the record must consequently be incomplete. Still I could see that the needle had been at work for the greater part of those three hours of consultation, and it should certainly tell us something. By eight o'clock the next morning I found an opportunity to steal away to the Rue d'Alger. The General and mademoiselle were awaiting me in the library, and we lost no time in setting the reproducing machine at work.

It was aggravating that Mr. Coventry still continued to tell his stories, but for two interminable hours the machine solemnly ground them out, one after another, and never did a really excellent *raconteur* have such an unappreciative audience. Mademoiselle walked the floor incessantly, the General swore softly to himself in some outlandish tongue, and I glowered sulkily over a succession of cigars. And then, suddenly:

"Coming now to business, my dear Baron — well, you have asked for security, and quite properly so. But what do you say to this?"

Unfortunately the waxen cylinder is sightless, and we have no means of determining what "this" may be. And the Baron is equally uncommunicative.

In reply he simply expresses a willingness to take "this" into consideration. Mr. Coventry argues long and earnestly, but the Baron is exceeding chary of committing himself. Twenty million of francs was what Coventry wanted, but after much haggling he finally agreed to accept fifteen millions.

"On the condition, Mr. Coventry, that I satisfy myself as to the value of the offered security."

"Perfectly so, Baron; but when shall we close the transaction? I must be on my way to Soulia by to-morrow night. I am already booked for the Oriental Express leaving at eleven o'clock."

"If everything is right, my dear fellow, the money shall go with you."

"And I shall see you—where and at what time?"

"Suppose we say"—here the record broke off; the needle had stopped short, and the remainder of the waxen cylinder was blank.

Provoking, indeed, but still certain points of importance had been established. In the first place, Mr. Giles Coventry was incontestably the paid agent of Jehan and of Soulia; secondly, he had apparently succeeded in finding a security that would satisfy Baron Kerker; and lastly, he would, if all went well, leave Paris, with the money in his possession, this very night.

Now we could not hope to interfere successfully with Coventry's movements. He was too old a hand to expose himself to any risk, however remote, and there was also the probability that he had recognized me in my character of the Baron's lackey. If so, he would be doubly on his guard. With the money once in his hands, he could laugh at us, since we were hardly prepared for the desperate extremity of highway robbery. Our one chance was to prevent the bargain from being consummated—to keep the Baron from delivering the goods. Very good; but how was it to be done?

It might be safely assumed that Coventry would not care to present himself at the banking-house in the Rue de la Banque. But the Baron was accustomed to leave his office at four o'clock, and the Oriental Express was scheduled to depart from the Gare de l'Est at eleven. It was between those hours, then, that our affair might be expected to come off, and the closest watch would have to be kept on the Baron's every movement. But of what avail to discover his plan of action unless we were prepared to thwart it.

"There is but one way," said mademoiselle, and then she leaned forward and finished the sentence in a whisper that could not have reached the curious ears of the most inquisitive of walls.

Well, the proposal was splendidly audacious, but in that same audacity lay its best chance for success. Moreover, it seemed to be the only possible solution of the difficulty. Assuredly, Coventry could not be headed off indefinitely, and he had already made his great point in bringing the negotiations with the Baron to a virtual conclusion. Plainly, the security would be found satisfactory, and the rest was a mere matter of business detail. The Baron's drafts could be intrusted to the post as well as to Mr. Coventry's care, and it would be madness to make any move against either. But the other end of the line! Yes; there we might strike, and effectively too.

It was magnificent, the clearness with which mademoiselle proceeded to outline the scheme of action. In half an hour every point in the strategy had been rehearsed, and each individual piece had been assigned to his or her position on the chess-board. The General hastened away, for there was much for him to do, and it was already half after ten o'clock. I lingered for a moment upon the pretext of writing a note—that long-deferred apology to Murchison. But, as usual, I did not get along very far. Mademoiselle had been standing at a window, but now she came over and sat down opposite me at the big table. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes shone.

"We shall win! we shall win!" she repeated over and over again. "But, win or lose, they are worth the living, these glorious days and hours. Is it not so, my friend?"

"For you, mademoiselle—yes"—and here my voice stuck in my throat.

"And why not for you also?" she asked, gravely. "Do you fear that we should prove ungrateful?"

"How could I think so, mademoiselle, when the only reward I desire is the assurance of your happiness."

"My happiness! Ah yes, my happiness."

She rested her cheek in the hollow of her hand, and neither of us moved nor spoke for some little time. And then she began again, speaking very softly:

"Shall I make my confession, then? Perhaps, having heard it, you may judge me still more harshly than now, but there is just a chance that you may understand, and so I beg of you to listen:

"Do you know how poor we were during those long years that we spent in that frightful Kensington? My frocks, how shabby they were! And my boots and my gloves. I was even ashamed to go to church. Our poverty—it met me at every turn; it was the last and the bitterest drop in our cup of exile. But if poverty was the shadow, the remembrance of my dear country furnished the color of my childish days. From my earliest remembrance it was the one word of conversation between my father and the old gentleman whom I called my uncle Basil. And so

Infelix was not my brother, nor even my cousin, but a real fairy prince; for had not Uncle Basil been king of that funny little country which in the geographies looks exactly like a sausage, and is colored pink? Ætolia! To me it came to mean everything in life, and all that made it worth living. What did it matter that papa had nothing better to smoke than his horrible porcelain pipe, and that we had meat only on the great feast days! Some day the Agricolas should come to their own again, with the black-and-orange banners fluttering in the sunshine, and all the bands playing 'Resurgam.' And I, who was only a girl, was still the daughter of the Czareska, who had kept the king's faith for a thousand years. Ætolia was my religion, my passion, my life!

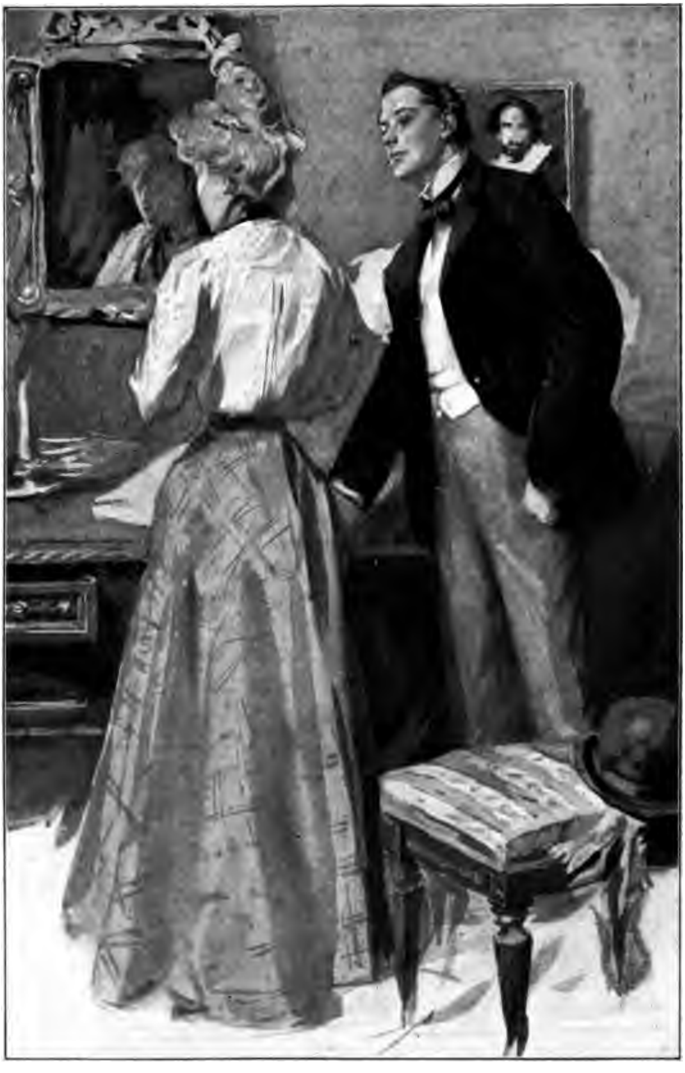
"We had been betrothed in infancy, you know—Infelix and I. It had been his father's last wish, and we Czareskas withhold nothing from the kings we love. And yet, when, a year ago, Infelix came to me and begged me to set the—the day, I refused. In my eyes he had been weak and unworthy of the name he bore. It was good, indeed, that we were no longer poor, but the hero should be able to withstand the sunshine as well as the storm. Infelix had been satisfied with his part in the little world of London society, and he had no mind for indulging in heroics over what he called the lost cause.

"It was just at this time that we received positive information from our agents in Ætolia that the hour had come to strike. And yet, without the co-operation of Infelix, we could accomplish nothing. Our half-recognized betrothal had been repudiated by me—in my shame and anger I had declared that everything must be at an end between us. And now he had come to me again.

"Well, if I erred in promising to be the wife of a man whom I did not love, it was from a motive as pure as that which led Jeanne d'Arc to the stake. He had asked me to name the wedding-day, and I did—it should be the same upon which Prince Infelix should ride through the Dragon Gate of Kar, with an orange cockade in his bonnet. And he accepted my conditions; from that time onward he was the Prince again, and the light came back to my father's eyes.

"You remember the incidents connected with the disappearance of the 'Cardinal's Rose.' It was not difficult for me to believe the story that you told, for I had seen enough with my own eyes to be almost sure of what had happened. It was just as I turned that I saw the Chevalier's hand moving stealthily in the direction of the half-opened despatch-box. For an instant my heart seemed to stop; then it awoke to exulting life. Infelix had again proved himself unworthy; the sacrifice would not be required of me, and for the first time in months I drew a long, deep breath—I was free. And then in another flash came back the remembrance of the cause for which I had been willing to sacrifice everything; I must not be too sure that the offering had been rejected. Even granting that Infelix had possessed himself surreptitiously of the ruby, it must still be remembered that it was his property, and that he was of an age to claim his own. I knew that he had been fretting at the deliberate caution of my father's plans, and with the impetuosity of youth he had been urging the necessity of hurrying things along. What more natural than that he should yield to the temptation of taking the starting-lever into his own hands? In the possession of the 'Cardinal's Rose' there was an immense potentiality. Turned into money, it might do everything."

"And you were right," I interrupted, although it



"'WITH YOUR PERMISSION, MADEMOISELLE, I WILL REMAIN'"

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was a sense of justice rather than of generosity that prompted me to speak. "The Chevalier undoubtedly appropriated the jewel, but in doing so he was the victim of Coventry's treachery; he made a mistake, but he did not commit a crime." And then I told in detail the conversation that I had overheard in the "yellow house," when du Midi had reproached his pretended allies with their dilatory tactics. He had placed the great ruby in Coventry's hands that funds might be raised upon it wherewith to carry on the Ætolian revolution. Of course he had been much to blame in his betrayal of General Czareska's confidence, and in his distrust of his oldest and best friend; but here again his conduct had been that of a weak rather than of a bad nature. He had unquestionably acted under Coventry's influence, and one might still pity the doer while he condemned the deed.

"So my intuitions were right," she said, musingly, when I had finished. "You can understand now something of the position in which I have stood during these last three months. It was absolutely necessary that my father should have no suspicion of what had really happened. He could not have understood nor made allowances, and the discovery of what he must have considered the Prince's dishonor would have broken his heart. And with my father would have died Ætolia's last hope, for you and I both know that Infelix will never be able to stand alone.

"Let me make my confession full and complete, Mr. Cary. When you first came to the Rue d'Alger, it was a reasonable supposition that you knew more about the disappearance of the 'Cardinal's Rose' than you were willing to avow. It was I, then, who suggested to my father, before you were shown up-stairs, that you must be detained at all hazards. And again, when I offered you your liberty at the Russian ambassador's ball, it was but to try you. Had you accepted the offer, you might have driven away in Mr. Benton's carriage, but you would never have reached his house. My agents had been given their instructions, and I would have sacrificed you with as little mercy as I had shown to myself—you who have since proved yourself the truest and bravest of us all. I recognized this when I would have prevented your going alone to the 'yellow house.' I was willing then that you should be free to withdraw from our dangerous company. But you would not go without that fuller explanation which at the moment I could not give. Now you know all, and again I beg of you to choose the part of wisdom and leave Paris to-night. You have already done us inestimable service, and I shall always be grateful for the privilege of having known so gallant a gentleman and true a friend as Nicholas Cary. It is good-bye, then. You know that when I insist upon a thing, it must be done," and she held out her hand to me across the table. But I would not take it—at least, not yet.

"But, mademoiselle, suppose that I still refuse to obey."

Quick as her eyes fell, I had caught a sudden light in them that made my heart leap. A woman knows well that her eyes will traitorously tell the very truth that her lips have just denied, and that her only safety lies in an instant retreat to cover.

"You forget," I continued, lightly, "that I am still in Baron Kerker's service, and so good a master is entitled to his customary warning. And, besides, I have been given a role to play in your little melodrama, and it is not fair to take it away from me until I have had the chance to try the part. And so, with your permission, mademoiselle, I will remain."

"To the end?" she said, very softly, for now we had risen and were standing close together.

"To the end," I answered, solemnly, and she listened as though it had been a prayer that had fallen from my lips. And then we went our separate ways.

When, twenty minutes later, I presented myself at the mansion in the Champs-Élysées, the major-domo called me into his room and curtly informed me that I had outgrown my usefulness as a member of the Kerker establishment. No explanations were offered, and I asked for none, being well assured that I should only be referred to Mr. Giles Coventry. My summary dismissal would make no difference in the part already assigned to me for the evening, but it would be well to report the circumstance at once to mademoiselle, and, after gathering together my few belongings, I hailed a fiacre and was driven back to the hotel in the Rue d'Alger. As we turned in from the Rue de Rivoli we had a narrow escape from a collision with a cab going rapidly in the opposite direction. The occupant of the cab was a woman, and although she was sitting far back in one corner, I caught a glimpse of her face as we drew past. Unless I was mightily mistaken the woman was Mrs. Verriker.

CHAPTER XV

A PRISONER OF WAR

AT precisely seven o'clock I took up my assigned position, directly across the street from the magnificent residence in the Avenue Hoche belonging to a certain M. Montalivet. All through the day we had been receiving reports from our agents, and it was absolutely certain that up to this time the Baron had held no communication whatever with Coventry. We knew that the final interview and the handing over of the money were to take place before eleven o'clock, the leaving time of the Oriental Express, but just where, and just when, the failure in the phonographic record made it impossible to say.

After leaving his office in the Rue de la Banque, the banker had driven to an establishment in the Rue de la Paix, and had remained for half an hour in close consultation with one of the heads of the firm. An hour's drive in the Bois followed, and at half-past six he had returned home. Coventry had been seen once during the afternoon in the vicinity of the Opera House, but he had returned almost immediately to his lodgings, and had apparently busied himself in making the ordinary preparations for his departure. He was safe, at least for the present.

From my knowledge of the Baron's social engagements we were aware that he had an engagement at eight o'clock to dine with the gentleman before whose house I had taken up my station. Slowly the minutes went by while I waited for my man's arrival. It was a possibility that Coventry might be among the guests, and the thought fretted me. It was the one contingency that might seriously affect our plan of action.

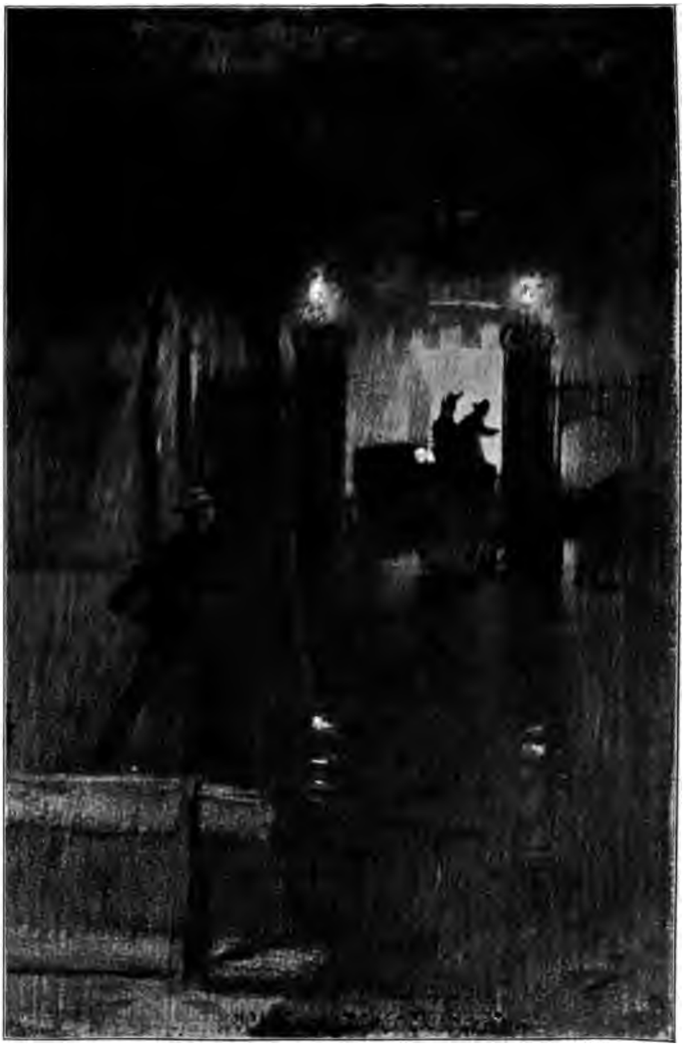
Two or three minutes before eight the Kerker carriage drove up, and, lounging carelessly past the gateway, I heard the loud voice of the Baron ordering the footman to return for him at exactly half after nine o'clock. I had caught a glimpse of the carriage, as it rolled into the court-yard, and the Baron was certainly alone. No other guests appeared, and I concluded that the dinner was probably a matter of business between the two men, M. Montalivet being also in the financial way. And finally I received a report by messenger from mademoiselle that the Baron had received no visitors at his house between the hour of his arrival from the Bois, at half-past six, and that of his departure for the Avenue Hoche, at a quarter of eight. So far so good; the all-important point was clearly established that no interview had as yet taken place. For the present, then, I had only to wait.

At first, the time went well enough for me, pacing up and down in the shadow of the horse-chestnuts, and keeping one eye always upon the entrance of the house across the street. The fever of the adventure was in my blood. I found myself calculating the chances of our desperate hazard, not only with coolness, but with a keen sense of exhilaration. The deed was already as good as done—we should succeed simply because we could not afford to fail. Yes; we should win—we should win; and my hand closed tightly about the butt of the revolver that I carried under my blouse.

It seemed so unreal, so impossible, that I, Nicholas Cary, of all men, had been given these master cards to play in a game where the map of Europe might come to be the stake. It was wholly ridiculous; I had no business to be even a spectator of the struggle, much less a participant. But Fate had dealt me the hand, and at that moment I would not have laid it down for all the money in Baron Kerker's big safe.

And then, quite as unaccountably as my spirits had risen did they suddenly go down again. It had begun to rain, and the smooth surface of the asphalt showed up black and glistening under the gas-lamps. But I did not realize that I was thoroughly wet and uncomfortable. Indeed, I should have welcomed the feeling as a relief to the intolerable suspense which I was now enduring. Our plans had been drawn with the utmost exactness, but what if something did go wrong? A very little thing would suffice to throw the gear-wheels out of line, and, with the mischief once done, the consequences would be so disastrous and far-reaching that I could not bear to contemplate them.

It was half after nine now, and, indeed, several minutes over the time, but the Baron's carriage had not appeared, nor had any attempt been made to summon it from the house. Had Samson and Stephan failed, or, worse yet, had the warning been given to the birds while the fowlers were even now spreading their nets? Was there a side-door, a back entrance, to M. Montalivet's house? Madame Verriker! A thousand and one conjectures flashed through my mind. And now what? Should I abandon my post and endeavor to communicate with my superior officers—or was it already too late? I stood irresolute, cursing impartially my stupidity and my bad luck. Only twenty minutes of ten, but that ten minutes had been an eternity.



"I RAN ACROSS THE STREET"

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The horses with their rubber shoes, and the carriage with its equally noiseless tires, were almost upon me as I ran across the street, but I managed to pick up my heels in time. I gave a hasty glance at the men on the box as the carriage turned into the court-yard—they were Samson and Stephan. So that part of the programme had gone through without a hitch. The Baron's own men were undoubtedly lying stupidly drunk in the back room of some cabaret sacred to coachmen, and happily unconscious that their livery was now being worn by the two strangers who had entertained them so often and so handsomely during the last hour and a half. Hardly had the carriage entered the court-yard when the great house-door was thrown open and the Baron appeared in person and called to the coachman to make haste.

Evidently the Baron had just realized that he had overstayed his time, and he was in a hurry to make it up. Stephan stood at the door of the carriage to receive his orders. It might be awkward if the Baron chanced to scan him too closely. Fortunately the rain gave our man the excuse to wear his oilskin-covered hat low down over his eyes, and his master did not even glance at him. "Home," he ordered, and the carriage-door slammed.

As the coach rolled out into the street I made a jump for the rear springs. There was no place upon which I could find a seat, but no matter; by holding on to the straps I could keep up the pace, and the first course would not be long. Samson had his instructions to turn into the first side street, instead of keeping straight down the avenue to the Rond Point, and the crisis would be quick enough in coming, once the Baron discovered that he was being taken out of his road.

Just as we had got fairly under way I looked back, and saw a cab being driven furiously from the direction of the Rue de Courcelles. It pulled up in front of the Montalivet house, and a man sprang to the sidewalk. Under the glare of the gas-lamp I made him out to be Coventry. Had he grown tired of waiting, and determined to hunt the Baron up at his host's dinner-table? No matter; he had not seen our carriage leaving the house, and we should be well away before he would be ready to take up the chase again. It had been a narrow margin, but enough for us to win out.

It was only a matter of ten minutes drive to the house in the Champs-Élysées, and I wondered how long it would take for the Baron to grow impatient. By this time Samson had so skilfully turned our course that we were now going directly away from our assumed destination, and were in the Rue Daru; there was the Russian church on our right. Perhaps I should not have used the pronoun "we," for, assuredly, I was being dragged along rather than carried, and I was getting a trifle out of breath. And so it was almost with a feeling of relief that I heard a snort of anger and surprise proceeding from the interior of the vehicle. A moment later the check-string was violently pulled, and the coach stopped. Stephan jumped to the ground and stepped up to the window on the near side. Now for my part.

I was at the other door the instant after and turned the handle quietly. It yielded, and I slipped into the vacant seat by the Baron's side. That gentleman was leaning out of the opposite window, and swearing alternately in French and German at the impassive Stephan. Then suddenly the Baron seemed to realize that there was something wrong; perhaps he recognized that the footman was not his own servant, in spite of the livery that he wore. With surprising quickness he drew in his head and threw himself bodily over to the right. Evidently his idea had been to leave the carriage by the other door, but of course he plumped straight into me, and then collapsed with an absurdly rabbit-like squeak as the end of the pistol-barrel came into sharp contact with his ribs.

"I am sorry to discommode you, monsieur," I said, speaking close at his ear; "but I need not waste words upon a sensible man like yourself. Do not attempt to stir or to open your mouth, my dear Baron. All right, Stephan."

Well, the old fellow took it all with astonishing coolness and with instant acquiescence in the unanswerable logic of the situation. For all that, I kept the pistol-muzzle in suggestive touch with his side, for we were now passing through the well-lighted thoroughfare of the Boulevard de Courcelles, and I had no intention of losing my prize before we reached port. Once we were obliged to come to a stop to avoid an automobile, and a gendarme strolled up to the very door of our coach. He touched his hat civilly, recognizing the eminent financier, and remarked that it was a wet night. The Baron politely agreed, and we drove on.

The rendezvous that had been given me was a house in a quiet street running off from the Place de Clichy, and we found the General awaiting us as the carriage rolled into the enclosure. The General helped the Baron to descend with serious affability, and murmured an apology for the extraordinary circumstances that were responsible for their meeting. The Baron bowed an acknowledgment and waited silently.

"It will be necessary, my dear Baron, that you favor me with your company for a few days," explained the General, with some embarrassment. "As we shall start upon our little journey very shortly, you may like to make a few changes in your toilet. If you will be good enough to follow my valet, he will see that you are fitted out with everything that you may desire."

"It is the General Count Czareska that I have the honor of addressing?" began the Baron, tentatively. "I think I know your face."

"At your service."

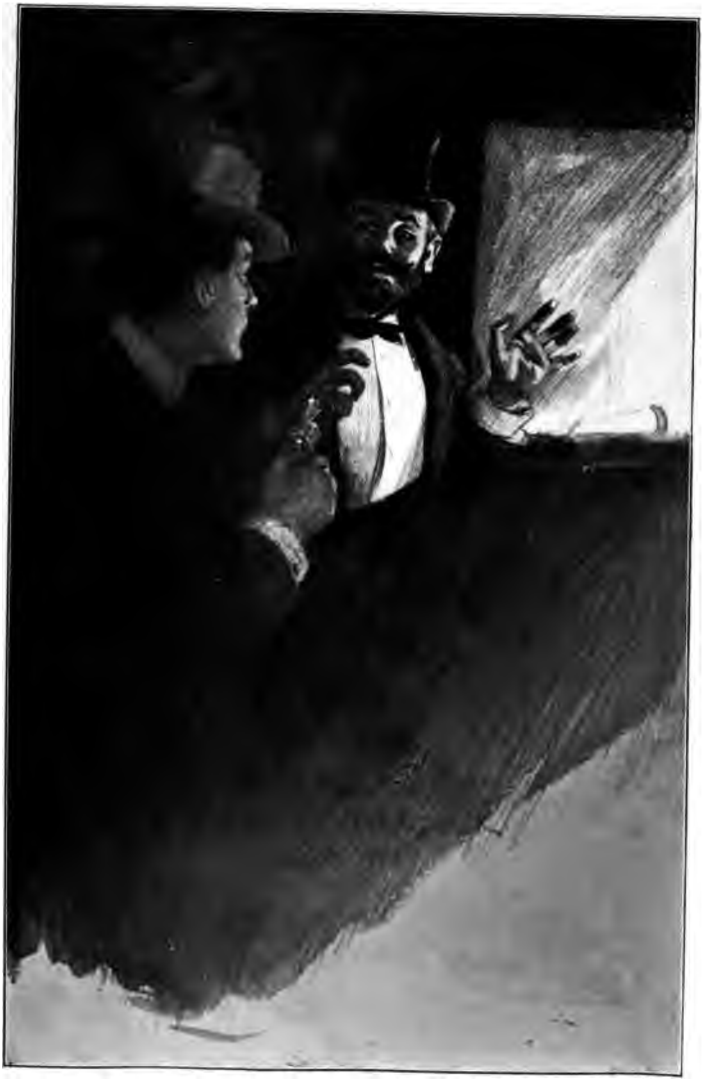
"*Hein!* that is quite enough, and I am entirely at your disposal, my dear General. For the moment I was under the uncomfortable impression that I had made the acquaintance of professional tax-gatherers, and was about to swallow my shirt-studs. But you, General — oh, that is different, and we amateurs should respect each other's little whims. I collect clocks, and you apparently make a specialty of bankers. *Eh, bien!* You have made an excellent start, and I am honored in being No. 1 in your catalogue. You said this way? At your service, then, General;" and with another profound bow our amiable prisoner of war followed Vital.

The General grasped my hand warmly and drew me after him into one of the ground-floor rooms. He was unmistakably worried and upset about something.

"Well, what is it?" I asked, as I looked about me. The table was strewn with railway maps and time-cards, and the General pointed at them tragically as he answered:

"Another dead wall. There has been an accident on the railway, ten miles beyond St.-Germain, and the line is blocked. Moreover, there is a second break—a land-slide, I believe, near Louvre. Not a train is likely to get through before morning."

Unpleasant news, indeed! The first section of our



"'DO NOT ATTEMPT TO STIR'"

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party, consisting of mademoiselle, du Midi, Mrs. Verriker, and the two maids, had taken the seven o'clock express, and, since they had gone through before the accident, they must be now nearing Havre. If we were compelled to wait for the clearing of the line we might as well throw up our hands at once. By morning Coventry would be pretty certain of what had happened, and the abduction of the Baron would undoubtedly make a tremendous uproar. Once the affair became known no disguise could insure us a safe departure from Paris, and we could not remain in hiding until the hue and cry had gone past. The house we were in belonged to a friend of the General, and had only been placed at our disposal for this particular night. The owner would return in the morning, and we could not think of involving him in serious trouble through our continued presence. It did look like a checkmate.

"You have seen the railway people?" I asked.

"They can do nothing, for there is no possible way of getting around the first wreck. Both lines are blocked, and will be for hours to come."

I walked over to the table and bent over the railway map that the General had been studying.

"It seems that Rouen is a division point," I said, quick, with a new thought. "We might get a special there which would take us through in time."

"Yes, but how are we to reach Rouen, which is sixty-seven miles from Paris? It is now half after ten, and even over the best of country roads, and with two or three changes, we cannot hope to do better than ten miles an hour. It will be eleven o'clock before we can get started, and, granting that we do make our best speed, it will still be after six before we can reach Rouen, and from there it is two hours and a half by rail to Havre. Remember that the fact of the Baron's abduction should be suspected, and indeed established, by eight o'clock at the latest, for Coventry will not be idle, and the telegraph will be set working in all directions. It is impossible; we cannot get away."

"One moment, General. We are not dependent upon horses nowadays."

"An automobile?"

"Precisely. The two-seated posting-carriage belonging to the Chevalier is stabled not far away, and Stephan can have it here within twenty minutes. It should be good for an average of eighteen or twenty miles an hour. Four hours to Rouen brings us to three o'clock. Half an hour's delay, while the special is making ready, and then two hours and a half into Havre, or say six o'clock. If we can do that we should have a safe margin over the telegraph."

And truly the idea seemed feasible as we hurriedly thrashed it out. The automobile would carry the four of us, and over the moon-lit roads (for the rain had now ceased) we could keep it running for hours on end at top-speed. Stephan understood the management of the machine, and I myself could take the lever if necessary.

It was decided, and while we were waiting for Stephan's return I improved the opportunity to cut into a joint of meat that stood upon the sideboard. I was surprised that cold lamb could taste so delicious, until I remembered that I had not eaten a morsel since my early breakfast at nine o'clock. Lamb, indeed! Why, it was the courage of a lion that came back to me as I stood and feasted.

The Baron entered the room dressed in a suit of gray tweeds and looking for all the world like some respectable British ironmonger on a holiday. One could almost see the Cook's coupons bulging out his breast-pocket. Serenely indifferent and imperturbably good-humored was the Baron, and he even condescended to help himself from my cigar-case. Truly a marvellously amiable man, considering the circumstances.

The automobile was standing in the court-yard, its big parabolic reflector peering into the darkness ahead like the veritable eye of Cyclops. The General intimated to the Baron that he should take his place on the back seat.

"Just one moment, my dear General. I have here a note addressed, as you see, to M. Bert, my confidential agent. As a matter of courtesy, I should like to have it delivered to him by seven o'clock. Of course, you are at liberty to acquaint yourself with the contents of the letter."

The General took the missive and read it through attentively. Then he sealed it up and handed it to Samson, who was to remain in Paris.

" I am happy to oblige you, Baron, and I make you my compliments. You are, indeed, a king among financiers. The letter shall be delivered as you direct."

A curious episode this, but it was none of my business to comment upon it, the General being surely responsible for his own actions. At the word we mounted to our places, and the automobile, with Stephan at the levers, ran smoothly out upon the asphalt. Fifteen minutes later and we had passed the fortifications.

CHAPTER XVI

TOUCH AND GO

THE city streets, with their asphalt and gas-lamps, were but a memory now, and the automobile was running under the open sky and between sweet-smelling country hedges. The night was delightfully cool, and there had been just enough rain to lay the dust and put the crushed-stone highway into the best possible condition. The moonlight poured down in a glorious flood, and our spirits rose as the heavy machine swept around curve after curve, keeping her feet as steadily as though she had been a ballet-dancer, and taking the easier down-grades with the speed-lever in the last notch. It was superb sport.

The Baron smoked incessantly, and made himself excessively entertaining. Never have I listened to a better *raconteur*, and it was impossible not to admire a man who could take his misfortunes so nobly.

Half after one, and we were still twenty-five miles from Rouen. But the automobile had kept the schedule to the minute, and if nothing unforeseen happened, we should arrive at three o'clock and on time. We had telegraphed on for a special, and it should be waiting for us at the station, with steam up.

The unforeseen has happened. Perhaps it is only a trifling disarrangement of the machinery, but Stephan has been working, wrench in hand, for full ten minutes without being able to diagnose the trouble. We have all alighted, and the General is holding the lantern, while I am standing within easy reach of the Baron's coat-collar.

Stephan has crawled out from under the wagon, and as much as intimated that he is at a loss. Plainly he is not much of a mechanic, and the longer he tinkers with that obstinate valve, the longer we are likely to stay here. And Rouen is still twenty-five miles away.

" Perhaps I may be able to remedy the difficulty," spoke up the Baron.

We looked at him doubtfully. It seems hardly the thing for our prisoner to be digging his own grave, even upon his own motion.

"I have my diploma from the Automobile Society," continues our obliging friend, "and I am proud to say that it contains the mechanical qualification. If you will permit me, then—"

Well, we can't be worse off for anything that the Baron may do or undo, and we accept the offer. The great financier immediately takes off his coat and casts himself headlong under the automobile, wriggling painfully along on his stomach to the point of operation.

"All right," he announces at the end of five minutes' hammering, and we drag him forth covered with dust and grease, but profoundly triumphant. He assumes his place as driver by a natural right, and in a minute or so we are again at top-speed. What complaisance! What cleverness! He is truly a wonderful man, this juggler of the Bourse and practical automobilist.

The special, an engine with a single coach, is in waiting when we finally arrive at the railway station in Rouen. The line is clear, and we should have a fast run into Havre. And all does go well. At a quarter after six o'clock we have left the train, and are on our way to the landing stage, where we expect to find the rest of the party in waiting. Out in the roadstead we catch a glimpse of the General's yacht, the *Sea Fox*. She is riding at a short chain, and smoke is pouring from her rakish yellow stack. Excellent!

The whaleboat, manned by four stout fellows from the crew of the yacht, was lying at the steps of the Quai Condé. In the sternsheets sat mademoiselle alone. Evidently the rest of the party had already gone aboard the *Sea Fox*. Her face looked white and strained, but it brightened up as she recognized us. She kept beckoning impatiently to us to come on, but it would not do to attract attention by being in too evident a hurry. There were a couple of gendarmes now strolling leisurely towards us.

We passed them with a polite reference to the beauty of the morning, and they looked at us with some curiosity and more compassion. But of course we were English and not accountable for our actions. Who but a mad Englishman would think of going out for a row around the harbor at seven o'clock in the morning? It must be a disease, this incredible fondness for water.

The passage down the quay seemed to be a mile long, but we dared not quicken our steps just yet. I kept my eyes fixed upon mademoiselle's face, and I saw the signal the instant that she gave it. I looked back. A messenger had just arrived upon a bicycle, he had spoken a word to the two officers, and they were coming down the quay on the run. And behind them were half a dozen more policemen just turning the corner.

"Double quick there!" I seized the Baron by one arm and Stephan had hold of the other. But, really, it was the Baron who dragged us along; it was surprising how he ran, for a man of his build. He literally tumbled into the boat as we gained the landing-stage, and fell under the thwarts with a mighty crash. An instant's pause to give the General a hand, and we were all over the gunwale.

"Take the tiller, Cary," bawled the General, and I scrambled aft and snatched the yoke-lines from mademoiselle's hands. "Shove off," I shouted back.

"In the name of the law!" came from the officer of gendarmes at the head of the steps. He had his drawn sword in his hand, and his men prepared to level their pieces. Our position was a critical one, but I had been hastily running over the chances in my mind, and I did not believe that the officer would order his men to fire. We might, indeed, be criminals in the eyes of the law, but our affair was not of the ordinary sort, and it might result in awkward complications should bullets be allowed to take precedence of discretion. Already the boat was in the tideway and we were drifting broadside to the pier. "Give way!" I said, smartly, and the oars dipped and strained against the strong current. Now we had come about, and were running for the *Sea Fox* as fast as four strapping oarsmen and a strong ebb tide could carry us. One of the gendarmes, in his excitement, actually fired at us, but his officer struck up the carbine with his sword, and the shot went wild. So far, at least, it was the bold game that had won the tricks.

It was a good two miles to where the *Sea Fox* lay, and after our course had been laid directly for the yacht the tide could no longer help us. We were also pretty deep in the water, and, in consequence, our progress was comparatively slow. But there were no signs of pursuit from the shore, and in half an hour at the furthest we should be alongside the yacht.

Mademoiselle touched my arm. "Gloriously done, Mr. Cary, but, really, apoplexy is likely to carry the prize away from us all. Do look at the poor Baron."

And indeed the predicament of the great financier was a pitiable one. He was roaring like a steamer's escape-pipe that is blowing off half under water, and so tightly was he wedged under the thwart that Stephan had to pry up the seat with a boat-hook before he could be released. Never did an uncrowned king of finance present so unroyal an aspect, his face blotched with mud and scarlet, and his clothing torn and wet from the bilge water washing up through the grating. His head wabbled limply as Stephan propped him up against the General, and for an instant, and until he had gotten his lungs full of air again, I expected to see him topple over. But in the next instant he had pulled himself together, and, producing his case, he selected and lit his seventeenth successive cigar. All this without a word—a remarkable piece of self-repression and plainly indicative of the man's character. If ever his chance did come to speak, we, who had subjected him to such indignity, might expect a bad quarter of an hour. I hinted as much to mademoiselle.

"He may have his chance even sooner than you think," she returned. "Look over there."

A needle-like steam-launch was driving along in our wake and not much more than a mile astern. The spray was flying over her stack, and she was being pounded for everything that was in her. In five minutes or less she would be alongside, and then in truth the Baron would get his innings. Our men set their feet hard against the stretchers and the water fairly boiled off the oar-blades. But what can human muscle accomplish when pitted against a Thorneycroft boiler? Nearer and nearer came the launch, and we could see the dull flash of her bronze bottom-sheathing as her sharp bow would overshoot a wave and hang poised for an instant on its upward slope. Then down again, as though she had determined to bore a tunnel to the bottom of the bay; a smother of flying spray, and once more the yellow gleam of her cut-water, and always a furlong nearer. A beautiful sight, indeed, had we been in the mood to appreciate it.

There was nothing that we could see, beyond that one umbrella-like puff of mingled smoke and steam, but some accident must have happened; the steam-launch was tossing helplessly about like a gull with a broken wing, and the race was over so far as she was concerned. But already three men in a gig had put off from the disabled launch and were bending strenuously to their oars. The gig was not heading in our direction, but was apparently making for a vessel that was swinging at an anchorage off the starboard bow of the *Sea Fox* and perhaps three cable-lengths away. A trim-looking boat this, and with the look of speed about her clean-run and beautifully moulded counter.

"The *Diane*," said the General, who had been studying her through his glasses. "The fastest torpedo-boat destroyer in the French navy, but the *Sea Fox*, with her turbine motors, can still spare her a couple of knots in every mile."

"But—but—" I stammered. "Do you really think—is there any possibility—"

"We know that Mr. Coventry is an intimate friend of the Minister of Marine," said mademoiselle, "and France is always willing to oblige Soulia when no inconvenient publicity is involved."

"And undoubtedly the word was passed to Coventry," I continued, excitedly. "He did not get the information in time to forestall our movements in Paris, but he knows now exactly what has happened. Technically we are guilty of a serious offence against French law in the abduction of Baron Kerker's person; by our resistance to arrest we became in fact enemies of France. Unless we can get outside the three-mile limit—"

"Not even then," interrupted the General, grimly, "for, unfortunately, the *Sea Fox* has a French registry. We must first have the luck to get away at all and then the faster heels to keep clear."

In a few seconds now we would be up with the yacht. I turned to mademoiselle.

"How does it happen," I asked, "that you were left alone at the post of danger? It is not like the Chevalier; I will say that much for him."

She flushed hotly. "It was necessary that the captain should be notified of our arrival, and the trip last night in the dark could not have been a pleasant one. I found it more comfortable to wait until the yacht's own boat could be sent back."

I bit my lip in silence. Of course du Midi had done the only proper thing under the circumstances, and my ungenerous slur had been properly resented. I had forgotten that mademoiselle was true to her friends.

We were quickly over the side and the whaleboat was cast adrift. There was no time to hoist it aboard, and we should have to trip our anchor as well. As the General and I mounted to the bridge I glanced again at the gig. Already the men in her were hailing the *Diane*, and it would not be long now before their message was delivered.

We found Crioche, the sailing-master, on the bridge, and a few hurried words made him acquainted with the situation. He jumped below to see in person that the necessary orders were promptly executed, and the General took his place at the telegraph. I ran into the pilot-house and laid hold of the wheel. Mademoiselle and the women had disappeared into the cabin, and Stephan had been instructed to keep the Baron in the deck-house and well out of sight.

The deck of the *Diane* was almost deserted. A couple of sailors were at work sail-making on the forecastle, and the officer of the deck was the only other figure in sight. It was washing-day, and the standing rigging was gay with red shirts and white "ducks." Nothing to alarm us in so peaceful a spectacle; after all, we may have been disturbing ourselves without due cause, and Coventry's arm was not so long as we had feared. At last the word came that all was ready. The General gave the signal to go ahead slowly, and a quartermaster bounded up the ladder and took charge of the wheel. I could hear the steam rushing through the escape-pipes, the screw began to throb, and the *Sea Fox* moved slowly down upon the war vessel. We were off.

The notes of the boatswain's pipe rang out with piercing swiftness, and the deck of the *Diane*, but just now deserted, was alive with men running to their stations. The covering of one of the six-pound quick-fire guns had been stripped off, and its long black tube was being trained point-blank on the *Sea Fox*. The lieutenant was standing on the rail with his trumpet at his lips. I could not understand just what he was trying to say, but his meaning was unmistakable. We could either stop or take the consequences.

By this time the *Sea Fox* was broadside on to the destroyer, and not more than a cable-length away. I could see by the way the gun was trained that the solid shell would be plumped straight into our boilers. It was madness to resist, and, with a bitter curse, the General gave the order to stop the engine.

"I will send a boat aboard of you," shouted the lieutenant, and I turned on my heel and lighted a cigarette. One must endeavor to be philosophical, though it is not pleasant to be cut down a foot from the wire.

There was a tremendous hubbub on the deck below me, and I leaned over the rail to see what was the matter. The Baron had broken out of the deck-house, and was dancing about in what seemed to be a perfect frenzy of rage. Stephan was doing his best to get him back under cover, but he might as well have tried to reason with a cyclone.

"Ah, you will, eh?" snorted the Baron, as he squared himself for a decisive effort. "Take that, and that!"

The Baron's big fist fell twice with ponderous emphasis, and the unlucky Stephan rolled into the scuppers. The lieutenant looked on with staring eyes. Was it murder that was being done?

"Yes, it is I, the Baron Kerker," yelled that gentleman, rushing to the side. "To the rescue, my lieutenant! Save me from these brigands, these assassins! I tell you it is I, the Baron Kerker!"

Well, the Baron was undoubtedly within his rights, but he need not have made such a horrible noise. Rescue was at hand, and there was no necessity for deafening us all. I felt annoyed.

"Will you go ahead?" came in quite another voice from this extraordinary lunatic. "I can't keep up this sort of thing indefinitely. Start your engines;" and then again, at the very top of his leather-like lungs: "Succor, my friends! It is I, Kerker! To the rescue!"

Hardly conscious of what I was doing, I moved the telegraph to full speed ahead, and instantly the engineer responded. The lieutenant was quite purple in the face from his vain attempts to make the Baron comprehend that he was standing directly in the range of the gun. If he would only be good enough to go either aft or forward; but apparently the Baron could not get this into his head. Just so fast as the gun was shifted, he would change his position to correspond, and it was impossible to fire without imminent risk of blowing the great financier into a thousand pieces. And all the while he continued to bawl forth his appeals for rescue, until I wanted to put my fingers in my ears.

From the position in which the *Diane* lay it was impossible to bring another gun to bear, and unless the Baron concluded to listen to reason, we should soon be too far away to risk a shot without danger of killing somebody, and it was evident that the lieutenant had his orders about the personal safety of our important prisoner.

Dashing his trumpet to the deck, the lieutenant ran to the gun-station and attempted to sight the piece himself. But again the Baron was in point-blank range—a maniac with whom it was impossible to reason.

For a moment my heart came to my throat, as the lieutenant snatched up the firing-line. But in the next he had dropped it, and with the one exclamation of "imbecile!" fairly bellowed at our good friend, he swung around on his heel and marched aft. The gun was swung inboard, and the sailors, crowding to the rail, looked after us with wondering eyes as the two vessels drew rapidly apart.

Down on the deck I found the Baron reposing on a pile of cushions, while the faithful Stephan stood at attention with a siphon of soda in his hand.

"Thanks to you, Baron, the *Sea Fox* has saved her brush," I said, gravely. "Deliver me from my friends," he retorted, and I fancied that a momentary twinkle lit up those hard gray eyes. But already the *Sea Fox* was lifting to the first long swells of the Atlantic, and the *Diane* was but a black cork bobbing up and down in our wake.

CHAPTER XVII

THE ENEMY'S HAND

THE *Sea Fox*, after a fast run through the big rollers of the bay of Biscay, is lying off the Spanish coast, not far from Ferrol. The electric launch is hanging at the davits, and the landing will be made shortly before sunset. I have just left the cabin after a long consultation with the General, and this, in a word, is the situation:

General Czareska and the young Prince are to go ashore this evening, and will proceed to join the Ætolian forces, which are now being massed in the vicinity of Kar, the capital. The whole success of the insurgent movement depends upon our getting in a knock-down blow at the usurper Jehan before the Powers see fit to interfere. The Soulian forces now in Kar outnumber the Ætolians actually in arms under General Ghika, but with the Prince raising the standard of revolt in person, there should be large accessions from the country-side; the patriots are only waiting for a leader whom they can trust.

Now the position of Soulia is daily becoming more delicate and embarrassed. Her protectorate over Ætolia is only a nominal one, and it is certain that the powers will not allow her to enter upon a campaign of aggrandizement. She may use her military strength to police King Jehan's capital and to disperse a mob, but she must not attempt to set the political pot aboiling; the delicately poised balance of the Eastern question must not be disturbed. But for all that the revolution, so-called, has been going on now for two months, and it is desirable to have some kind of a decision. And so the Powers have adopted the novel expedient of a time limit.

To-day is July the 1st, and it is tacitly understood that upon the 11th of this same month the Commissioner of the Powers for the Central Balkans will arrive at Kar, and he will be empowered to recognize the *status quo*, and only that. For these ten days Jehan and his Soulian mercenaries will be free to crush us if they can, upon the plea of putting down a revolt against the established order of things, and, conversely, we have the privilege of the same period in which to prove to the Powers that the movement is a genuine national uprising against a foreign tyrant.

If Soulia were not financially embarrassed she might easily overwhelm the Ætolian patriots by mere weight of numbers, but it takes money to move men, and ready money, too. If Coventry had succeeded in closing his negotiations with Baron Kerker, our chances would have been slim indeed, but as it is we have succeeded in drawing the strings of the money-bag and in putting them well out of reach. Unless Coventry can re-establish immediate communication with Baron Kerker the Soulian treasury must remain empty, for there is no time in which to initiate fresh negotiations. Plainly we must keep the Baron a close prisoner until July the 11th, the end of the period of crisis.

The General has proposed to put me in command of the *Sea Fox*, with Crioche as sailing-master. During these ten days we are to take good care to keep our distance from everything either afloat or ashore.

On the 10th of the month I am to run into Ferrol or Lisbon at my discretion, and at both places telegraphic instructions will be awaiting me. After setting Baron Kerker at liberty and turning over the yacht to Crioche, I will then be expected to join the triumphal procession into Kar or to cover the retreat to England as the case may be. Anything may happen in these ten days. And Mrs. Verriker and mademoiselle are to remain on the yacht.

It did not take me long to decide. "I will accept the trust, General," I said, when he had finished speaking.

The old man put his hands on my shoulders: "My dear boy," he said, very quietly, and that was all, except for the warm grasp of the hands. There is no need to speak when the word is already understood.

It was growing late, and time for the shore-party to be getting away. The Chevalier, or rather the Prince, was on deck, dressed for the journey, and it was the first time that I had seen him since we had been aboard the yacht. He had kept to his berth, on the plea of indisposition, and he had refused my offer to bear him company. I was sorry, for we had been friends, but of course there was nothing to be said.

He looked ill and troubled now as he stood at the rail talking earnestly with Mrs. Verriker. Was there never to be any end to this eternal plot and counterplot? But this would finish it, thank heaven! In another hour I should be putting out to sea again for those ten long beautiful days with Irma Czareska. For a little while, the shadows under which we had lived so long would be lightened and we two might walk together in the sunshine. If after that the shadow again—well, the memory of those days would still be mine. Only to be near her, to see and speak with her for that little while, and I should be content.

The General, accompanied by mademoiselle, came on deck and hurried over to where the Prince was standing.

"All is ready, sire," he said, simply, and baring his gray head, he stood waiting the boy's pleasure. Somehow the scene realized for me the meaning of all that had happened and of all that was now to come. We republicans affect to smile at the divine right of kings, and truly there were but few of the royal marks about poor du Midi. His weaknesses were patent enough to all who knew him. It was only that in this new adjustment of their relations something had passed from the elder to the younger man and the latter had been able to carry it off well. He could never have seized the purple mantle for himself, but since it had been laid across his shoulders, he wore it with grace and dignity.

"For the present, General, I have decided to remain aboard the yacht," said the Prince at last.

The old man's face changed. "To stay here on the yacht?" he echoed, wonderingly.

"Yes."

"But I do not understand."

"There is no need that you should," returned the Prince, haughtily. "There is no obligation upon me to acquaint you with the reasons for my course of action."

"But, sire—"

"That is sufficient, General Czareska. I shall wait here on the *Sea Fox* until I have received certain advices. Remember that I am no longer a child, and, as this is my own affair, I will manage it in my own way."

"My boy! my boy!" The stern face was working convulsively; he held out his arms as though he would draw the young man to his breast.

It was the critical moment. The Prince wavered; he looked ashamed of himself, a petulant child, whose rebellion needed but a word to subdue it, once and forever. But it was Mrs. Verriker who spoke.

"It is a difficult business—this king-making," she said, with smooth insolence.

It was skilfully done, that touch upon the jarring chord of vanity and weakness. The irresolute curves about the Prince's mouth straightened obstinately, and the color flashed up to his temples.

"You will receive my orders, General Czareska." He spoke rapidly, and in a high key, and the old man bent his head and listened in silence. "You will report to General Ghika, at Kar, and proceed to co-operate in the plan of action already communicated to him. You will understand that nothing is left to your discretion—nothing whatever. That is plain, I think, and you have only to do your duty as you find it."

It was a painfully long half-minute of silence, and I could not bear to look at the General. Disgraced, superseded, the cherished plans of a life swept away at the whim of a wilful boy, and the hand of the enemy so plainly visible in it all—ah, but it was heart-breaking.

"Well?" demanded the Prince, abruptly. He tried to light a cigarette, but the vestas went out one after another.

"I shall proceed at once, sire, to carry out your instructions. There is nothing else?"

"Nothing. Except that, of course, General, I rely upon your utmost diligence and entire devotion."

The Prince turned away, glad enough of the pretext afforded by his unmanageable cigarette, and the cockswain of the launch reported that the boat was at the companion-way. The General went over the side and stumbled to his place in the stern-sheets. He had not said a word to me as to my course of action under these new circumstances, but I could readily understand that nothing greatly mattered now either way. In losing the Prince we had already lost everything, and I must simply save what I could from the wreck. I leaned over the rail and looked down at the launch. The bowman stood ready to cast off.

" All right below there?"

" One moment."

It was mademoiselle who stood at my elbow, dressed in dark skirt and storm cloak, and attended by her maid with a hand-bag.

" I could not let him go alone," she said, "and now Ætolia, more than ever, demands all that I have to give. Infelix!—but perhaps it is better as it is. I am wearied to death of all this plotting and planning, and am content to let things drift for a little while. Chance may manage better than I have done, and so good-bye."

Her hand lay close and warm in mine, and for an instant the beautiful brilliant face seemed almost at my lips. And then with a half-laugh, or was it a half-sob, she ran quickly down the ladder and took her place by her father. He did not look up, but he moved aside to make room for her.

"Cast off there."

The launch drifted slowly away from the *Sea Fox*, and the water bubbled up under her stern as the screw began to turn. I stood at the taffrail until I could no longer mark the distinction between a whitecap and the flutter of a handkerchief, and then turned to go forward to the chart-house. It would be an hour before the launch could return, and I might improve the time by a little study into the navigation of the South Atlantic.

At the foot of the bridge companion-way I ran into du Midi, or the Prince, as I must now learn to call him. He caught me by the arm.

"Where is Irma?" he asked, pettishly. "I have been looking for her everywhere."

I stared at him coldly. "She went ashore with General Czareska," I answered, and pushed by without another word. Nor did he attempt to detain me, and when I went into the cabin, half an hour later, he had retired to his state-room.

Now I had come into the saloon for a purpose, and I walked straight up to where Mrs. Verriker sat placidly reading. She looked up at me, her eyes gleaming with triumphant audacity.

"You are a clever woman, madame. May I inquire when you expect to communicate again with Mr. Coventry?"

"Within a day or so at the furthest," she answered, coolly. "Have you any messages?"

"Only one, and that I expect to deliver in person." I walked over to the large state-room directly in the stern of the yacht, and lately occupied by mademoiselle, and threw open the door. "Now, Mrs. Verriker, if you will be good enough to step this way."

"You will not dare!" She spoke without any pretence of misunderstanding my meaning. "I will appeal to the Prince."

"I owe no allegiance, Mrs. Verriker, to either the King of Ætolia or to the Caliph of Soulia. Moreover, we are on the high seas, and my papers as commander of the *Sea Fox* are in regular order. I am waiting, madame."

She saw that I was determined, and yielded—a wise woman was madame, and so the more to be feared. I placed the key of the state-room in my pocket and left strict injunctions with André, the cabin steward, to remain on duty in the saloon until relieved, and to hold no communication whatever with the prisoner. If she wanted anything the request must be referred to me in person. Then I hastened on deck, for I was getting anxious about the launch. It was just being hoisted aboard as I came up, and a few minutes later Crioche, the sailing-master, reported that the yacht was ready to get under way. The course of straight out to sea was given to the quartermaster, and the *Sea Fox*, plunging forward to the first big roller, took joyfully to mouth her accustomed bone and romped away with the whole broad South Atlantic boiling up under her forefoot. It would be a fast pack that should pull down our sea-vixen once she was well away.

The door of the chart-room opened, and the Baron came out with the shamefaced air of one who has prolonged his after-luncheon nap to unconscionable excess. His eyes travelled in puzzled inquiry from the dim line of the Spanish coast to the squat figure of Crioche pacing the bridge.

"I have overslept myself again," he murmured, in apologetic tones. "But tell me, was it not for this afternoon that the landing was planned? Have I missed it entirely, then? It is too bad, for I particularly wanted a farewell word with M. du Midi."

"General and Mademoiselle Czareska went ashore an hour ago," I answered, briefly. "The Chevalier du Midi preferred to remain aboard, and you will find him in his state-room."

"So!" whistled the Baron, in soft surprise. He looked as though he wanted to ask an indiscreet question, but he spared me the trouble of an evasion, and suddenly pointed out to sea.

"The smoke of a steamer," he said, gravely, peering under his arched hands at the little smudge lying broad on our starboard bow. "One of the Mediterranean packets—if I am not mistaken."

I sent a boy to the wheel-house for the binoculars, but the distance was too great to make anything more of the stranger. Very possibly, as the Baron had suggested, it was one of the Messageries boats, but it was my business to keep the *Sea Fox* away from everybody for these next ten days, and I would take no chances. A good-sized steamer, and heading south, was the final conclusion, and I sung out to the quartermaster to let the *Sea Fox* bear up a couple of points. That should be more than enough to clear us, and there was no necessity for keeping to any one particular course. All we wanted was a wide field and no company.

Dinner was a stupid meal that night, although the Baron ate for two, drank for four, smoked for a dozen, and, indeed, did his best to keep things going. But there was not a word exchanged between the Prince and myself, and he finally retired on the pretence of a headache. The Baron and I lingered over the dessert; really it was impossible to be grumpy in so amiable a presence, and I was astonished at discovering how many interesting possibilities there are in the scientific culture of roses.

We finally adjourned to the open, but it had turned chilly, with a drizzling rain, and after a turn or two of the wet deck the Baron went below. I lingered a few minutes to smoke out my pipe, while I chatted with Crioche. Was there anything to be seen of our unknown steamer? Something twinkled faintly low down on the horizon, and I contended that it looked like a mast-head light. But Crioche as stoutly insisted that it was a star, and the argument being an unprofitable one I cut it short by knocking out my pipe and following the Baron.

Crioche had orders to call me if anything out of the ordinary happened, but there was no necessity for my taking any of the watch duty, and I was glad enough to tumble into my bunk. But not to sleep so easily. For two or three hours I lay awake, staring at the deck-beams above my head, and wondering if we were ever to come to the end of this dark tunnel.

It was plain enough now that Mrs. Verriker had been acting the part of a spy from the very beginning, and her confidential relations with the Czareskas had made her information of the utmost value to the enemy. It was undoubtedly through her that Coventry had become suspicious of my presence in the Czareska household. I knew too much about the disappearance of the "Cardinal's Rose," and it was only good fortune that had saved me from the point of his buttonless foil. It was Mrs. Verriker again who had warned Coventry of the role that I was playing in the domestic service of Baron Kerker; and, finally, it must have been a communication from her that had enabled our enemies to follow so quickly upon our traces in the affair of the Baron's abduction. But her great triumph had been to lead the young Prince into an attitude of open rebellion against the General. How skilfully she had worked upon the boy's vanity and weakness, and how fatal the consequences might prove both to the Prince himself and to those who were risking everything in his behalf!

As matters stood, we retained only one advantage of material importance—the possession of the money-bags. Soulia would get no loan from Baron Kerker so long as I could keep him safely sequestered on the yacht, and with any kind of luck I should be able to carry out my trust. The revolutionists would have their ten clear days in which to capture Kar and unseat Jehan, and much might happen within that time.

If only the Prince had not played the fool at this last moment! In holding the Baron safe, I was also keeping the Prince off the scene, and in the mean time the fires of patriotism were dying low and might go out altogether. It was too bad.

My own position, as I came to think it over, was scarcely an enviable one. It was reasonably certain that measures had been taken at Coventry's instigation for our capture and punishment, and, although the *Sea Fox* was a swift and stanch vessel, we were sailing in dangerous waters. It must be remembered that the yacht flew the French flag, and our offence of kidnapping a French subject was a flagrant one. At any moment we might be surprised or overhauled by a French man-of-war, and, of course, the slightest resistance would be madness.

It was impossible for me to stay in my bunk any longer, and so I dressed and went on deck again. The night was still rainy, and the *Sea Fox* was running at half-speed on a southwest course. My idea was to make a long sweep into the South Atlantic, cruise in those comparatively deserted waters for a week, and then make a quick dash for Lisbon, timing our arrival for the afternoon of July 11th. The affair would be over then for good, and the next step could be taken when we came to it.

There was nothing to be seen or heard that could indicate the presence of another vessel in our neighborhood, and as I was dead tired I went into the chart-room and threw myself down upon a lounge. My brain was still hard at work threshing out the old straw, but little by little the puzzle and the trouble of the day slipped away and only Irma Czareska's face remained behind. And, being well content to go on looking at that, I must finally have fallen asleep.

CHAPTER XVIII

FOX AND HOUNDS

THE fog was one solid wall around us when Crioche shook me by the shoulder and told me that it was six bells in the morning watch. The yacht was running dead slow, with the siren blowing at half-minute intervals; the deck was slippery and chill with the gray masses of vapor that closed us in on every side, and I felt miserable enough until the steward brought me a bowl of hot coffee. Presently the Baron, with his eternal cigar, joined me, but the Prince did not appear. We paced the deck for a few minutes, exchanging uncomplimentary remarks about the weather; then the Baron went into the chart-room with a novel for company, and I ran below for a bite of breakfast. While I was eating my own meal I gave the key of Mrs. Verriker's room to the steward and told him to carry in a breakfast-tray. I half expected that she would ask for an interview, but apparently she had neither complaint nor protest to make, and after seeing her safely locked up again, I returned to the bridge.

Eight bells, and the fog was still as thick as ever. We barely had steerage-way, and the siren had stopped blowing, the engineer reporting that one of the valves needed repacking. It was an unpleasant position, for we were dead in the track of the Mediterranean boats, and I had no mind for being run down and cut in two. Once or twice I fancied that I heard a steamer's fog-whistle, but I could not be sure. There was nothing to do but to wait.

"There comes the wind at last," said Crioche, and a little puff of air broke like a bubble through the aqueous vapors that surrounded us. Just above the main truck was a patch of blue; in a few minutes now we should be able to see our way. Already the wind was growing stronger, and the fog was melting away like a lump of sugar in a cup of tea.

Down shot a shaft of yellow light, Dame Nature's own broom, and in a twinkle sky and seaway were swept clear of their misty cobwebs.

"*Mille tonnerres!*" broke from the lips of the Baron, who had just joined me on the bridge, and I followed the direction of his pointing finger. Not two cable-lengths away, on our starboard quarter, lay a long, black hull with the tricolor of France floating at the gaff. The *Diane!*

It was plain enough that they had been waiting for us, for it was only ten minutes ago that our whistle had stopped blowing. Since then the yacht had been drifting slowly down upon the war-vessel, impelled by that mysterious attraction which exists between floating bodies. There was not the shadow of a chance to escape, for, as I have said, the two vessels were lying within point-blank range of each other, and the *Diane* had her port battery of six-pounders trained squarely upon us. Our old acquaintance, the lieutenant, hailed us.

"We will send a boat aboard of you!" he shouted through a megaphone. "Stop your engines immediately!"

In bitterness of spirit I gave the signal to the engineer, and the *Sea Fox* lost her headway. The

Frenchmen were clearing away a cutter, and in five minutes now they would be over our rail. What a mess I had made of the business intrusted to me! Stupid!—incapable! There are no adjectives too strong for the man who has failed, when failure means so much. I turned to speak to the Baron.

"It will be your turn—" I began, and then stopped short. The Baron had left the bridge, and was hastily running forward. Well, it didn't matter.

The cutter was in the water now, and pulling straight for us. I ordered out the ladder and waited as impassively as I could. A quartermaster answered the hail for a line, and the officer in charge of the cutter climbed nimbly to the yacht's deck, followed by four sailors.

The lieutenant wasted neither time nor politeness in going through the customary formalities of the occasion.

"The *Sea Fox?*" he inquired, and then, without waiting for an answer: "Order your crew abaft the foremast, and let me see your papers."

"See! my dear lieutenant! What a word to use when a man is smothering under this gray blanket of fog and smoke! The devil himself would not know his own in such weather."

It was the Baron who had spoken, and I realized that the fog had again closed down upon us, and, indeed, was thicker than ever. The *Diane* had been completely blotted out, and I could hardly distinguish the blur of our own foremast twenty feet away. Then it lightened momentarily, and I did see something else. The two machine-guns that the yacht carried forward had been run out and made ready for business, Stephan standing at the lever of one, while the Baron in person manned the other. The Baron had his gun trained directly upon the French lieutenant and his little boarding-party, while Stephan was covering the gangway. In an instant I had grasped the situation and had acted upon it. The telegraph flashed the signal of half-speed ahead to the engine-room, and the quartermaster at my side threw the wheel hard over to port.

" Are you mad, monsieur?" shouted the lieutenant, as he felt the first throb of the propellers and realized that the *Sea Fox* was again under way. "Do you want to be blown out of water?" he continued, excitedly.

"Gently, my dear sir. If you will be good enough to look first behind and then around you, you will understand that I am justified in acting as I do. I will now give you thirty seconds in which to get into your boat and cast off. You will be picked up by your ship when the fog lifts—and I have all the passengers that I care to carry."

Well, I could hardly help laughing outright at the dumb amazement with which my cocky young friend confronted the pepper-box muzzles of the machine-guns. And as for his own ship, she might as well have been a thousand miles away for all the assistance that she could give him. The logic of fact was inexorable, and he had to give in to it.

"You understand the consequences of your act," he said, in a choking voice.

"Perfectly, sir—but your boat is awaiting you."

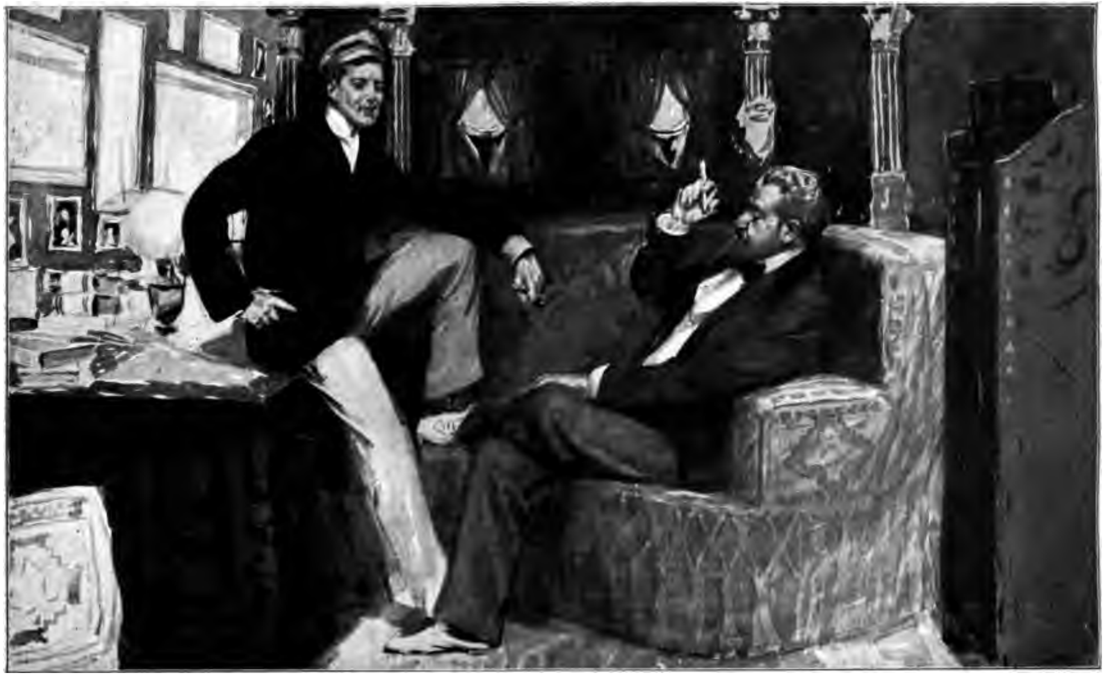
The lieutenant bowed; I returned his salute, and he followed his men over the side. The line was cast off, and in an instant the cutter had slipped astern, lost to sight in the proverbial basin of pea-soup. I ran to the speaking-tube and called down for full speed, repeating the order on the telegraph. The *Sea Fox* gave a bound, and then sprang ahead as though a pack of hounds had opened upon her. If only the fog held for these coming ten minutes!

Luck was with us this time, for when the mist finally dissolved into a glorious day the *Diane* was fully five miles to leeward. But it was speedily made clear that she was not yet ready to abandon the chase. Already she had picked up the cutter, and now she had altered her course so as to lay us aboard. She fired a shell from her bow rifle as a final hint, but the distance was too great, and the gun was quickly run in. The chase was on now for a finish, and I had an opportunity to measure up the unpleasant possibilities that might attend upon an adverse result. Still, they would have to catch me first, and the South Atlantic is a big hunting-ground.

As has been said, the *Diane* was a torpedo-boat destroyer, and was rated at thirty-two knots. The *Sea Fox* was equipped with Parsons's rotary turbine motors, and had developed a maximum of thirty-six knots on her trial-trip. Other things being equal, we should leave the *Diane* hull down on the sky-line within the next three or four hours. On the face of it the fox had the heels of the hounds.

I left the bridge in charge of Crioche and went into the chart-room for a few minutes' rest on one of the big lounges. I found the Baron there, surrounded as usual by a cloud of cigar-smoke. We shook hands warmly. "You are a most remarkable prisoner of war," I said, smilingly. "It would almost seem that you object to being rescued."

"My dear Cary," returned the Baron, solemnly, "you see before you a man who has not had a real vacation in eighteen years. Thanks to you and your friends, I am now enjoying a respite from the cares of business, and I don't propose to be deprived of my well-earned repose without a protest. I am out of school, and I don't intend to go back until I am good and ready. Is that clear?"



"I FOUND THE BARON IN THE CHART-ROOM"

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"Oh, I am quite prepared to believe it, after seeing the fashion in which you handled that machine-gun. So you are a practical artillerist as well as automobilist?"

"Merely in the amateur way, my dear fellow. And, by-the-bye, there was no cartridge-belt in either of the guns. An interesting piece of evidence if the affair ever came to a trial."

"Baron, you are a great man! What a poker-player you would make!"

"Some day you will teach me, eh? That will be delightful, and it will enable me to forget the Bourse. But keep up your steam, my brave young man. The fog is a good card, but it cannot be played twice."

The three or four hours passed, and it was uncomfortable to note that the *Diane* had not been left astern according to programme. So far as I could judge our relative positions remained unchanged—if anything we had lost a trifle. The log had indicated thirty-two knots in that first burst of speed, and although it was not our best showing, it was reasonable to conclude that the *Diane* would fall short in about the same proportion of her nominal steaming power. I walked aft and looked again at the "cherub" or patent log that was towing astern. To my amazement it indicated only twenty-six knots, and even as I stood looking at it it dropped to twenty-five. Waiting only long enough to be sure that the log was working all right I ran below to the engine-room.

The chief engineer was a Scotchman by the name of McLeod, and a new recruit to the *Sea Fox*. He had been hired on short notice at Havre, to fill the place of Brand, the regular chief, the latter having been taken ill some ten days ago, just as the yacht was about to be placed in commission. McLeod had given excellent references, and there was apparently no reason why he should not get the best out of the *Sea Fox*, it being understood that he had had some special experience with her peculiar type of motor.

As I entered the engine-room I happened to glance at an oil-cup that covered an important bearing. The cup was dry, and already the bearing was creaking ominously.

I shouted at McLeod, and he came up, a bit reluctantly as I thought. I called his attention to the mischief that was being done, and he mumbled some kind of explanation under his breath. But I had not come to hear excuses, however good they might be.

"If anything happens to these engines, my man," and here I stared hard at him, "why, look out for squally weather. It's your neck or mine, and the choice at present lies with me." The fellow's eyes dropped, and he involuntarily fell back a step or two.

"And what does this mean?" I continued, pointing to the steam-gauge. "Only one hundred and sixty pounds—and you should have at least two hundred and twenty!"

"It's the coal," he answered, sullenly; "a rotten lot of slate and other truck. You can't stoke with such rubbishy stuff."

"It was the best Welsh steaming," I retorted, "for I sent General Czareska's order myself. Stand aside there, I want to have a look at the bunkers." McLeod made as though he would bar my passage, but quickly thought better of it, and I stepped into the fire-room. The stokers were hard at work, and the furnaces were apparently in full blast. I picked up a piece of coal and examined it carefully. It was undoubtedly Welsh and of the best quality. McLeod had lied to me, and he must be purposely wasting his steam.

"If you please, sir," and one of the coal-passers touched my sleeve. I turned and inquired what was wanting. "We're running very short in the bunkers, sir. At this rate they will be out before morning."

I stared open-mouthed at this messenger of Job. "You are crazy, man," I said, roughly, having found my tongue at last. "The bunkers were full up when we left Havre, and they are big enough for a month's steaming."

"Then there is some kind of devil work aboard," he returned, excitedly. "Will you look in here, sir?"

He led the way into one of the bunkers. The compartment seemed to be three-quarters full of coal, but when my man plunged a heavy fire-bar into the mass, it struck hard on some planking that lay only a few inches below the surface of the fuel.

"And it's the same in all the others," he insisted, stubbornly. "There's this false bottoming in them all, so that they look to be full when they're only carrying about a quarter of their holding."

In a few minutes I had satisfied myself that such was actually the case. Here was another fingermark of Mrs. Verriker's clever hands. Just how the trick had been played was beyond my knowledge, but the fact remained that we would be out of fuel within twelve or fifteen hours. Devil's work, indeed!

Crioche I knew to be above suspicion, and the job of putting the false bottoms in the bunkers might easily have been done during his absence from the yacht two weeks ago, when the General had summoned him to Paris to receive his final instructions. The stoking crew were a new lot, and had only been put aboard three days before we sailed. And the two assistant engineers had also joined at the last moment, and were entitled to the benefit of the doubt.

But there was one person who must have known about this dirty piece of business, and that man was, of course, McLeod, the chief. He had been in charge at the time when the yacht was coaling, and he was either directly concerned in the plot or criminally neglectful of his duties.

I went back into the engine-room with one hand upon the revolver that I carried in a side-pocket. I glanced at the steam-gauge. It indicated two hundred and fifteen pounds, and just then Berton, the first assistant, entered to begin his watch.

"You will act as chief until further orders," I said, calling him up to me, "and I want the very best that you can get out of her. I will see you again in a moment."

I turned to McLeod. The man's face looked like a piece of wet paper, and his knees were shaking. "March!" I said, briefly, and I forced him to precede me up the companion-way. There was no need for any more words, and he went into his state-room without the least show of resistance. I turned the key over to Stephan, and instructed him to remain on guard duty until relieved. Then returning to the engine-room, I had a short talk with Berton. He denied all knowledge of the crooked work in the fire-room, and insisted that he only wanted a chance to prove his good faith. I told him that he could have it, but I was very plain as to what I expected of him. Coal or no coal, the *Sea Fox* must continue to make from twenty-eight to thirty knots an hour until further orders. After dark we should determine upon our next move.

Going on deck, I looked again at the log. We were making twenty-six knots, and should be gaining on the *Diane*. At our present rate of speed the coal should hold out until two or three o'clock in the morning. In the mean time we must open tne gap as wide as possible.

It was past noon, and Crioche had just finished working out his observations. The result showed us to be in Lat. N. 40.10, and with an offing of some three hundred miles from the Portuguese coast. Roughly speaking, Lisbon bore the same distance away to the southeast. At our present rate of steaming we might make port within eight hours or so, but it would be impossible for us to change our course with safety, unless we could contrive to give the *Diane* the slip under cover of darkness. At present she was steaming in a parallel line between the *Sea Fox* and the coast, and our margin of actual speed was too small to give us any chance to cut in. Even now she was only some six or seven miles away, and I had a great respect for the effective range of her rapid-fire batteries. But if we could get well ahead before darkness fell, it might then be possible to extinguish our lights and make a quick dash for Lisbon and safety. Fortunately the moon would be down, and the sky was already clouding over.

All this meant a complete upset for our plans, but there was no help for it. Without coal, we could not hope to keep at sea indefinitely, and assuredly I had no fancy for being overhauled by the torpedo-boat destroyer and carried back to France to answer to the serious charges that would be brought against me. Of course, if we made port to-morrow, I should have failed to carry out General Czareska's orders, and the Baron would have his liberty a week ahead of time. But, after all, what difference could it make whether the banker owed his release to the captain of the *Diane* or to the French consul at Lisbon? We were beaten in either event, and it was now every one for himself. And, besides, there was my other charge, the Prince.

Hunting up the Baron, I laid the case frankly before him. "You will understand," I concluded, "that your personal liberty is assured the instant that we land on Portuguese soil. We have been squarely beaten out on that line, and if Soulia is to have her loan, so be it. I also realize that no possible apology can be offered you for the treatment that you have suffered at our hands. The outrage must be regarded as an act of warfare, and punishable only because of its non-success. I prefer to surrender to you rather than to the captain of the *Diane*—that is all."

"But supposing that I do not choose to interfere with your future movements—what then?" queried the Baron, calmly. "If I am not indiscreet," he hastened to add.

"I should at once rejoin General Czareska in the field, and do my best to persuade the Prince to accompany me. But I am afraid that my arguments will not weigh much against Mrs. Verriker's influence. And yet even now the presence of Infelix might turn the scale."

"So!" mused the Baron. "Well, perhaps you are right, perhaps not. And now shall we go down to luncheon?"

It was a long, anxious afternoon, and I spent it in pacing the quarter-deck, with one eye always on the patent log that was spinning astern. And I must have made at least twenty trips to the engine-room. Berton was doing splendidly, but the furnaces, under forced draught, were eating up the coal at a fearful rate. We calculated that it would be out by three o'clock in the morning if we kept on driving the yacht at her maximum of speed. Yet there was nothing else to do, at least until darkness fell. In the mean time I smoked more than was good for me, and almost succeeded in keeping pace with the Baron. At seven o'clock I had a bit of supper served to me in the chart-room, and then waited with growing impatience for the twilight to darken into night. At eight I could no longer see the hands of my watch, and I determined that the time had come.

CHAPTER XIX

A STERN CHASE

IN order that the reader may understand what follows, I will set down again, as briefly as may be, the particulars of the situation in which we found ourselves. Our objective-point was now Lisbon, but between us and the Portuguese coast lay the enemy. The mast-head light of the *Diane* was plainly visible over our port quarter, and Crioche calculated that she was hardly six miles away. We could not possibly get so far ahead as to be able to cut across her bows in safety; the Frenchman would have us pocketed the instant we departed from the parallel lines in which the two vessels were steaming. If, however, we stopped our engines, the *Diane* would quickly run ahead of us, and we should then have room under her stern in which to make the final dash for Lisbon. Excellent strategy, but it depended upon the presumption that the captain of the *Diane* would be obliging enough to overrun us by just that necessary margin of two or three miles. As a matter of fact, he would probably discover without delay that we had stopped our engines, and his first thought would be to bear straight down upon the *Sea Fox* rather than to keep on running away from her. It is a safe rule in playing the *Kriegsspiel* to give the enemy credit for a little more intelligence than he actually possesses; it acts as a healthful stimulus to one's inventive faculties.

It was an old, old trick that I had in mind. Nothing more than a false floating-light, the last resort of the salt-water novelists. But it had come to that with us. If the trick worked, we should get that coveted inside place, and have at least a run for our life. If it failed, we were no worse off than before, and in either case our bunkers would be bare by two or three hours after midnight. On a straightaway course, there was not the shadow of a show for us; the *Sea Fox* must use her brains now, if she were to save her brush.

Crioche had been at work preparing the weighted barrel that was to carry the lantern, and at a given signal our side and mast-head lights were extinguished, and the floating beacon lowered into the water. Then the *Sea Fox* was headed away on a long diagonal to her former course, and on a line which should bring us plump across the destroyer's bows. But we calculated that the Frenchman, having noticed that our false light was stationary, would change *his* course, and bear down upon it in the hope of finding the yacht disabled from some accident to her machinery.

They were assuredly keeping a sharp lookout on the *Diane*, for hardly five minutes had elapsed before her red port-light flashed into view, indicating that she had changed her course, and was running down upon our floating beacon. It seemed too good for belief that the trick had really come off, but the *Sea Fox* was doing her best now, and in a very few minutes we should have the rail on our pursuers and Lisbon under our bows.

It is hardly necessary to say that I had given strict orders against showing a light of any description. I even compelled the Baron to dispense with his eternal cigar, and there was only the carefully shrouded glimmer of the binnacle-lamp to relieve the coal-black obscurity in which we were racing along.

Suddenly the *Diane's* green side-light disappeared, and only the red light on the port side remained to show that she was passing us. A few minutes later and that too went out of sight; the *Diane* was now steaming almost directly away from us, and we had shaped our course for Lisbon. The *Diane* had still three or four miles to run before she would be able to make out the nature of our false signal, and every minute now was precious. Our one chance lay in getting the longest possible start on the enemy, and it looked as though we had succeeded.

The Baron and I clasped hands with a spontaneous impulse, and for the moment I forgot entirely the curious relations in which we stood; it seemed quite natural that his sympathies should so evidently incline to our side.

"The first blood, Baron!" I cried, exultantly. Then my voice died away in my throat; I became conscious that I had crowed a bit too soon. The *Diane* had suddenly shown both her side lights again, and this meant, of course, that she had discovered the trick, and had spun round on her heel to take up the chase after the real quarry. And apparently she had picked us up without the smallest appearance of uncertainty, for she was plunging along at full speed, dead in our wake.

To be sure, they might have guessed that we would make for the coast, but how had they been able to hit upon our exact course, and that, too, without the loss of a moment's time? It looked very much as though our enemies had received a tip upon our whereabouts. But who could have given it, and how? It was really most unfortunate, for I had calculated that a long start would permit of several hours of moderate steaming, and a consequent saving of our precious coal. If we were to be pushed to it at once the bunkers would be empty while there were still a good hundred miles between the *Sea Fox* and her hole. These turbine motors, at top-speed, require an enormous amount of steam, entailing a corresponding consumption of fuel. But it must be done, for we were now idling along at an eighteen-knot rate, while the *Diane* was racing down upon us with the speed of a Hudson River ice-yacht.

Well, we are holding our own again, but still the sharp bow of the torpedo-boat destroyer keeps pointing dead on our stern-post, and she is marking us down as exactly as though we had been lit up for a ball. And yet, cabin and deck, the *Sea Fox* is in absolute darkness, not the glimmer of a match-head showing anywhere, and, as I have said already, the night is cloudy and darker than the ordinary. It is very perplexing, and even more alarming. Is the *Sea Fox* leaving a veritable scent that these dogs-of-war are running her so closely?

The patent log was working unevenly, and I thought it possible that it might be partially fouled with sea-weed. I leaned over the taffrail and gave the cord a jerk or two in order to free it. As I did so my eye caught a yellow glint of light shooting out over the half acre of foam churned up by our screws. There it was again! There could be no mistake—a light must be showing at one of the cabin stern-ports. Then I remembered that Mrs. Verriker was a prisoner in an after state-room, and I anathematized my stupidity. It was true that I had ordered Stephan to extinguish the lamp in her room, but I had overlooked the possibility of her relighting it.

Calling Pierre, the boatswain, to follow me, I jumped below. There was no outward evidence of a light in

Mrs. Verriker's room, but so clever a woman would never neglect the obvious precaution of stopping up threshold crack and key-hole. I rapped at the door and demanded admittance. Madame answered obstinately that she had retired for the night, and that compliance with my request was impossible. Argument being futile under the circumstances, I ordered Pierre to set his shoulder to the door. Crack ! and it had parted with its hinges. Mrs. Verriker was discovered sitting at the table and placidly working on her embroidery frame.

With the briefest of apologies I blew out the lamp, which was swinging directly in front of the unshaded port-hole, and turned to go.

" At least, sir, you will have the decency to have my door replaced," remarked madame, icily.

" I'm afraid not, Mrs. Verriker. The door will probably be needed for another purpose, and since you have not retired, I really think you would find it more comfortable on deck. Allow me."

Of course she had to obey, and I left her in charge of the Baron, who would see that she did not get into any new mischief. Then I sent for Berton, and received his assurance that the coal would hold out until after two o'clock. In the mean time I should be preparing another kind of diet for those insatiate gluttons, the furnaces.

The *Sea Fox* was a top-sail schooner in rig, and I quickly had men aloft sending down the lighter spars and yards, which the carpenter and his mates proceeded to cross-cut into convenient lengths for the fire-boxes. Then the top-masts were unshipped and lowered—a heavy job, but old Crioche understood his business, and the *Sea Fox* carried a large crew. Fortunately we had plenty of axes and saws, and every man could be put to work. Even the cook and the cabin stewards could be employed in ripping out the cabin fittings and lighter wood-work.

By two o'clock in the morning the deck of the *Sea Fox* resembled the wood-yard of a city mission. The lower masts had been cut away close to the deck, the deck and pilot houses had been taken to pieces, and the wreckers were now busy gutting the cabin. The *Sea Fox* had been fitted up in the most sumptuous fashion, and I felt like a vandal as I watched axe and saw biting into those superb mahogany and rosewood panels. But the devil was driving now, and it was needs must.

At fifteen minutes after two o'clock Berton sent word that the coal was about gone, and I organized a line of passers to hand the new fuel down the fire-room hatchway. And then the sport began in earnest.

The wood was light and dry, and burned freely in the intense draught of the furnaces. There was a continuous stream of sparks at the funnel-mouth, and the incandescent particles shooting high in the air made a beacon that might be seen for miles. It was a true pillar of fire for the guidance of our enemies, and of course any further concealment of our position and intentions was now impossible. The *Diane* had been edging away from the direct line ever since the extinguishment of the guiding light in Mrs. Verriker's window, but now she was at our heels again, and coming, indeed, somewhat faster than I liked.

Cut, rip, and smash! The men were working like demons, and the yacht was being rapidly stripped of everything that could be made to burn and that was not absolutely indispensable for keeping the *Sea Fox* afloat. It was a heart-breaking task, for the fiery mouths of the furnaces were ever crying "More!

More!" and it was a difficult job to break up the solidly constructed fittings and partitions that General Czareska's builders had put into the yacht. The General had wanted a good sea-boat, and he had not been cheated in his contracts.

On and on we worked under the blistering showers of sparks that fell from the smoke-stack, choked with eddying, acrid vapors, blinded with sweat and dust, but working on just the same. My brave fellows! they shall be well paid for their devotion, when Fortune's wheel begins to turn again.

The Prince had come on deck, and was watching the proceedings impassively, with now and then a whispered word to Mrs. Verriker. But the Baron! Ah, the incomparable Baron! Actually he did the work of two or three men, cutting and sawing with the best of them, joking with the valiant, cheering the faint-hearted, and never forgetting to keep one eye on the patent log and the other on the *Diane's* mast-head light. What should we have done without the help of this excellent man? Who could resist admiring this large-hearted sportsman, who could sink all personal feeling so completely in his generous ardor that the game should be played to a finish? It was not your fight, old comrade, or rather you were on the wrong side of it. But since it had turned out to be a closely played contest you could not resist taking a hand in it. My compliments, Baron Kerker.

Two, three, four hours passed, and the *Sea Fox* was still making the running. But the *Diane* was unquestionably gaining, and we must be almost if not quite within range of her bow rifles. I wondered at first that she did not use them, but her commander had undoubtedly received his orders against doing anything that might imperil the safety of our distinguished bone of contention. The Baron's personal safety must be kept in mind, and so it was merely a race to a stand-still.

Crioche had calculated that in another hour, or by seven o'clock, we should be over the three-mile line, but it would be touch-and-go, for our men were becoming exhausted under the strain of continuous hard work, and the steam-pressure was dropping steadily. All of the lighter wood-work and top-hamper had already gone into the fire-boxes, and the wreckers were now sawing up the lower masts, and ripping out such portions of the bulwarks and deck timbers as could be spared without endangering our immediate safety. But this new supply did not burn so freely, and Berton came up to say that there was not enough heat in the stuff to make steam.

"Oil," suggested the Baron. A happy thought, and instantly adopted. A barrel of kerosene was hoisted out of the forepeak, and the Baron, arming himself with a watering-can, set to work with all the enthusiastic energy of a *pétroleur*. The wood was thoroughly sprayed with the oil, and under the fierce draught of the blowers it melted away in the fire-boxes as though it had been so much tissue-paper. Again the needle of the steam-gauge pointed to a working pressure, and the *Sea Fox* sprang ahead for one last effort. And there was Lisbon light dead on the starboard bow.

It was just seven o'clock, or six bells in the morning watch, when the yacht dashed over the three-mile line. The *Diane* had by this time drawn up to within a couple of miles, and she might easily have pounded us to pieces had she dared to use her guns. As it was, she could only show her teeth, not use them, and our heels had been just long enough to take us into cover. The men cheered and laughed as the destroyer fired a blank shell, and then altered her course, in intimation that she had abandoned the chase. She gave us the courtesy of dipping her ensign, a politeness that we were unable to return in kind, seeing that everything was flush with the deck. So the Baron waved his handkerchief, and we went on our way.

Two hours later and I stood on the landing quay at Lisbon, having left Crioche in charge of the dismantled hull of the once beautiful *Sea Fox*. Mrs. Verriker, the Baron, and du Midi had gone ashore with me, but I had received no intimation of their intentions. There could be no compulsion now; it was for every one to do what was right in his or her eyes.

While we were waiting for the baggage to be examined, I noticed that the Baron and du Midi were engaged in earnest conversation, with Mrs. Verriker standing by in silence. Suddenly the Baron turned to her and said a few words of interrogation. Mrs. Verriker nodded a quiet assent, and du Midi's face changed strangely. He spoke to her himself, and it was evident that she was reiterating her former statement. Then du Midi stepped back, while the Baron escorted the lady to a carriage, and installed her therein with ceremonious politeness. The carriage rolled away, and the two men walked over to where I was standing. The Chevalier looked strangely agitated; he put out his hand, and I took it, wondering what had happened.

"I have just come to a realization of my folly," he said, with passionate quickness. "But even now it may not be too late. I go to rejoin General Czareska by the first train out. You were my friend, Cary, and perhaps you will judge me less harshly when you know all. But not here—the railway station—here is an empty coach—in with you, Nicholas, for God's sake!"

I turned to the Baron. "And you?" I said, inquiringly.

"I will take the box-seat," returned that gentleman as he mounted nimbly to the driver's side.

CHAPTER XX

THE LADY IN BLACK

THE Chevalier, the Baron, and myself are seated in the private saloon of a train denominated express by courtesy, and we have just crossed the frontier into Spain. Fortunately, we had not lost even an hour in Lisbon, for the regular Eastern Express was waiting at the station when we drove up at a gallop from the landing quay. But since then our rate of progress has been exasperatingly slow, and to-day is the 4th of July. At this rate we shall not be in Ætolia before that fatal tenth day.

The Chevalier has made a clean breast of the whole perplexing business, and I know now what I have suspected all along to be the truth. From the first the boy had been nothing more than a tool in the hands of that rascally pair, Mrs. Verriker and Mr. Coventry. It was they who had contrived to cast suspicion upon the loyalty and good faith of General Czareska, and little by little the young man had yielded himself completely to their influence. Hence the incident of the "Cardinal's Rose." Coventry had persuaded du Midi that upon the possession of the great jewel depended the success of the entire movement. General Czareska was holding it as a pretended trust, and in the mean time the Ætolian revolution was slowly flickering out for want of armament and funds.

The ruby was the family property of du Midi, and surely he was justified in taking possession of his own wherever and whenever he could. The manner of its reacquisition was of no consequence, but the jewel must be obtained, cost what it may. And Coventry would then be responsible for the rest.

Well, we knew the rest already. Of course, Coventry, as the confidential agent of Jehan and of Soulia, had never intended that the patriot war-chest should benefit from the affair of Dover pier, by so much as a copper sou. The substitution of the false ruby was simply for the purpose of keeping du Midi quiet, while Coventry, with the real stone in his possession, was negotiating with Baron Kerker for a Soulian loan. The "Cardinal's Rose" was to be the pledge, and only our great coup in taking possession of the Baron's person had prevented the transaction from going through. It was certain that the Baron's money was still in his strong-box, but where was the "Cardinal's Rose?" The question was on my lips a dozen times as du Midi and I exchanged notes upon the several parts that we had taken in this drama of intrigue, but somehow the query never found voice. Doubtless I should know in good time.

Finally, it was through Mrs. Verriker that Coventry had been able to keep in such close touch with his dupe. The Chevalier was to understand that all their plans would be ruined unless he obeyed instructions to the letter. He was to fall in with the General's wishes in order to avoid suspicion, but he must always be prepared to assert his independence when the word came. Consequently, he might go aboard the *Sea Fox* with the Czareska party, but he was not to leave the yacht without direct instructions from Coventry. And of course those instructions would never come so long as there was a chance that the patriot cause might be strengthened by the personal presence in the field of the young prince, their rightful lord. No wonder that the old General had gone away in despair to lead his forlorn hope. Without du Midi he was worse off than Jehan deprived of the pecuniary support of the Kerker money-bags. The country-side would not rise, and all would be over upon the arrival of the commissioner of the Powers on July 10th.

It seemed incredible that Coventry should have been able to get du Midi so completely into his power, but as I thought it over I could make allowances for the boy. Coventry was a gifted and charming man, and his influence upon du Midi was the ascendency of a strong, unscrupulous nature over one of almost feminine mould and of a singular candor and generosity. The Chevalier had trusted Coventry implicitly, and it was his nature, having once given his confidence, to carry it out to the end. Yes; I could understand all that, but how to account for du Midi's sudden return to sanity? The Baron had undoubtedly informed him of Coventry's double-dealing, but the boy would still have demanded absolute proof. Had that been forthcoming? I looked at the Baron inquiringly.

"That is my secret for the present," he answered, smilingly. "It is enough that our young friend at last knows where he stands, and that we are on our way to Ætolia."

"Surely, Baron, you don't include yourself in that 'we'?"

"I am still on my well-earned vacation, and if I wish to take a little jaunt into Central Europe, who is there to object?"

"The detectives, perhaps. Remember that you are still the victim of an outrageous abduction, and half the secret police of Europe are anxiously seeking fame and fortune."

"True," returned the Baron, gravely, "and I shall accordingly proceed to shave off my beard."

With the aid of a safety-razor the Baron succeeded in changing his appearance to a marked degree, and at our first important stopping-place he managed to procure a red wig from a hair-dresser's stock. The metamorphosis is now complete, only the Baron has rather overdone it, and his extraordinary get-up is well calculated to attract the very attention that he is presumably anxious to avoid. The ill-fitting suit of dittos, the blue spectacles, the red wig—all these things fairly scream out the information that the gentleman is in disguise. However, the Baron carries it off with a humorous gravity, and I really think that he has regarded the whole affair as a joke from the beginning, and that he proposes to extract from it the last possible atom of mirth. At least, I am well assured of his good faith towards our party; and so our desperate adventure has turned out successfully after all. Soulia will get no loan from Kerker & Company until we have had our chance at King Jehan's throat. This I know.

Rhodopolis at last! after fifty hours or more of jolting over those abominable Spanish and Italian railways, and with innumerable changes of cars. There are not many people who travel regularly between Lisbon and Kar, and the connections are consequently poor. And, besides, we were obliged to wait over for two whole days in Madrid on account of du Midi. He was suddenly seized with a succession of fainting-fits, and until we could get medical assistance both the Baron and I were terribly anxious about him. He responded quickly to the treatment, but the physician insisted upon those two days of absolute rest, and, indeed, du Midi was too weak to lift his head from the pillow. But on the third day he got his strength back, and, in spite of the doctor's remonstrances, he insisted upon going on. It turned out all right, for there has been no return of the alarming symptoms, and, as I have written, we are in Rhodopolis at last. Here is the real beginning of our journey; we are in the heart of the enemy's country—I mean Soulia—and our every forward step must be beset with perils both seen and unseen. But what would you, and to-day is July 8th!

Rhodopolis is the most important railway junction in Soulia, and the terminus of the one line into Ætolia. It is a question, though, if any trains are running in these troublous times. Of course, we have been devouring every newspaper that we could obtain en route, and they have given a fair amount of attention to the Ætolian imbroglio. In brief, this is how the affair stands:

General Ghika, with a few thousand revolutionary troops, is at Markana, a village about six miles distant from Kar, the capital. Jehan is behind the walls at Kar, and has with him two regiments of Soulian regulars and a small number of Ætolian militiamen, who are in his service as a paid body-guard, the latter a poor lot, in every sense of the word. There have been a few skirmishes, but nothing in the way of a decisive engagement. Jehan's policy is to wait, and if he can hold out for two or three days longer the commissioner of the Powers will undoubtedly decide in his favor. He has only to preserve the *status quo*, and he must win.

The patriots might even now carry the day by one swift and well-planned stroke, but there is no one to order it. General Ghika is incompetent, Czareska's hands are tied, and the young Prince is absent from the head of his battle-line. The country-side has not risen, and it will not rise until it is assured that it is, indeed, the Agricola who calls them. The king must come to his own if he would possess it. And so the balance hangs stationary, and to-day is the 8th of July.

It is this tardy realization of his error that made our journey so intolerably long and wearisome to poor du Midi. He would sit by the hour, motionless, at the carriage window, with the train-schedule in his hand, and, no matter how long a time there might be to wait at the several connecting points, he would insist that no one should leave the station. The Baron and I grew heartily sick of the tasteless buffet fare, but we appreciated the necessity of doing nothing that might add to the mental excitement under which the Chevalier labored, and so there was no help for our suffering stomachs. Even at Milan, where we had two hours' leeway, and might have dined comfortably at the Grand Hotel, we were obliged to content ourselves with the inevitable cold chicken and a handful of olives. I shall never care for chicken again, and my painfully acquired taste for olives is rapidly leaving me.

There was still another disagreeable recollection connected with Milan, for it was there that I fell under the uncomfortable impression that we were not yet through with Mrs. Verriker. I certainly saw her, or some one who resembles her remarkably, on the platform of the railway station. It was only a momentary glimpse; I had that curious feeling of being looked over, and glanced up to see a woman dressed in deep mourning just stepping into a forward compartment of our own train. Her face was covered with a veil, but there was something about the turn of the head that suggested my ancient enemy. The idea rather upset me, for she could make trouble enough for us if she were so inclined. Personal violence would be hardly possible even in half-civilized

Soulia, but there are ways and ways, and it would be her business to prevent our reaching General Czareska's camp, or at least to delay us.

At one of the way-stations I got out and walked past the line of carriages, hoping to get another glimpse of the "lady in black." Still I could not suppose that madame would let herself be caught so easily, and I was not surprised to find the curtains of one first-class compartment closely drawn. That in itself went to confirm my suspicions, for there was no one else on the train about whose identity there could be any question. I said nothing to du Midi, but I gave the Baron a hint of what was in my mind. He smiled. "Perhaps she is after the reward," he said, grimly.

Now, as we had learned from the newspapers, the Baron's abduction was still the reigning sensation of Europe. Kerker & Company had offered a reward of one hundred thousand francs for any information that might lead to the great financier's restoration to his sorrowing partners, and there were supplementary bounties for the apprehension of General Czareska and of my insignificant self. It gave me a queer little thrill to read the description of my person printed out in full, and accurately, too, but fortunately my name had been metamorphosed into Clare, and I hoped that the mistake would at least have the effect of sparing my few remaining relatives some natural mortification. As matters stood, our party would make a fine haul for some hard-working detective, and it was quite probable that the entire secret police of Europe were eagerly looking out for us. But, after all, I might have been mistaken about the "lady in black," and little by little the incident faded from my mind. We would cross that bridge when we came to it.

We had reached Rhodopolis about eight o'clock in the morning, and of course our first anxiety was centred upon the question of our further progress. Was the line to Kar still open?

To my relief the official answered that the regular train would leave as usual at nine o'clock. It was reported that the insurgents had appeared in force at Markana, which is six miles from the railway, but as yet they had made no effort to interrupt railway communication. Still, the danger existed, and the company could not insure our safe arrival at Kar. If we took passage it would be at our own risk.

It is needless to say that the fear of being held up by General Ghika's cavalry did not trouble us much. Once across the Ætolian frontier and we could do very well for ourselves. Our plan was to leave the train at Nissa, the nearest point to Markana, but it would be hardly politic to intimate our intentions to the Soulian officials. So I told Stephan to have four passages booked through to Kar, and, if possible, to secure us a compartment in an empty carriage. He came back in a few minutes and handed me my change in gold and notes.

"For three napoleons they have promised to put on a saloon-carriage, and it will be at the rear end of the train. Have I done right in engaging it, Excellenza?"

"Perfectly, Stephan. I would have given ten if necessary."

"I learned something interesting, Excellenza," he went on. "The train is to take up a large sum of money for the payment of the Soulian troops now in Kar. The treasure is in a van that is to be placed immediately ahead of our carriage, and it is to be guarded by a squad of regulars. Ah, now, if we could but give our General a hint of what is coming!"

And, indeed, such a capture would be a glorious stroke in the patriot cause, for the information indicated plainly that King Jehan's mercenaries must be getting uneasy. The pressure must have been pretty strong to have squeezed any juice from the Soulian orange, and it would be worth ten times its nominal value if that military chest never reached its destination. But we could do nothing by way of warning our friends; we should be lucky to find a safe delivery for our own valuable persons.

The train was already making up, and, as usual, we did not leave the station. The Baron cast more than one longing glance at a comfortable-looking restaurant across the way, with "*Café de Paris*" in big gilt letters on its sign-board, but it was too late in the day to be running any unnecessary risks. So we had to patronize the station buffet, and fill ourselves again with the loathy cold chicken and with innumerable cups of scalding hot tea.

The meal, such as it was, at least served to pass away the time, and the station clock showed that it wanted but fifteen minutes to the hour of departure. The train was standing at the platform, but the doors were still closed, and would not be opened until five minutes before starting-time. It was hot and stuffy in the refreshment-room, and a couple of small coins induced the doorman to let us out on the platform. The Chevalier went at once to our reserved carriage, but the Baron and I took a turn or two in order to finish our cigarettes. Suddenly the remembrance of the "lady in black" came back upon me. If it really was Mrs. Verriker, we had been lucky indeed to have escaped without receiving some token of her ill-will, and I said as much to my companion.

"Don't be too sure that we are through with her," he answered, coolly. "If I am not very much mistaken she is standing this very moment at the window of the booking office."

I followed the direction of his eyes and recognized the "lady in black" as madame, without a doubt. But she had not seen us, and we had only to get into our carriage and draw the curtains. Perhaps an excess of prudence, but we could not afford to neglect the smallest precaution.

The doors were thrown open and our fellow-passengers trooped out. It was a picturesque crowd of Scaramouches—Bulgarians and Servians in their national costumes, poorly uniformed Soulian soldiers, peasant farmers, red-faced and loaded down with bundles, and of course the inevitable commercial traveller, inevitably Jewish. Most of these people would leave the train at the several Soulian way-stations at which the train was scheduled to stop, but the journey was still an event of the first magnitude in their eyes, and the clamor and confusion grew with every passing moment. In my curiosity I thrust my head out of the carriage-window. Provoking! for at that instant Mrs. Verriker passed down the platform and our eyes met. She favored me with an enigmatic smile, and quietly disappeared into the crowd. I was vexed at my imprudence, but when, five minutes later, the train pulled out of the station, it did not appear that any harm had been done. No one had attempted to interfere with us, and we were safely out of Rhodopolis and on the road to Ætolia. In a few hours we should be across the line and among our friends. It was odd that Mrs. Verriker should have followed so closely upon our track, but of course she must be going through to Kar to rejoin Coventry. What could be the bond that united these two?

The train proceeded at a fair rate of speed for a Continental Express, and according to the time-card we should be due at Mitkoff, the last station in Soulian territory, about three o'clock in the afternoon. From there it was a run of fifty miles to Nissa, where we were to leave the train. Slowly the hours wore away, but every turn of the wheels was in our favor, and even du Midi's spirits rose as the train began to wind its way up from the level plains of North Soulia to the broken and elevated regions delimitating the Ætolian plateau. In a little time now and we should be *doing* again; the passive verb is properly enough associated with the idea of suffering, and nothing wearies like inaction.

Mitkoff is a large town for Soulia, but we should stop only long enough to change engines. So the guard informed us, and the Baron, who was hungry again, felt inclined to grumble. There had been no chance for anything excepting a cup of tea and some fruit since we left Rhodopolis, and we should have been glad enough for a fair chance at the despised fare of the railway eating-house. But it was not to be, and consequently the Baron grumbled.

"You will have time to snatch up a chicken sandwich and a handful of olives at the buffet," I suggested, maliciously, and the Baron actually went into a fit of the sulks and declined to speak to anybody.

But when we had pulled into the station at Mitkoff he determined with a sigh to try his luck after all. "Perhaps they may have sausages," he said, more hopefully, as he plunged into the crowd around the copper samovars.

The fresh engine had been coupled on, and the guards were requesting the passengers to resume their places. Where was the Baron? Ah, there he comes, and with a smoking frankfurter in each hand; this is luck indeed!

"Hurry up!" I called, and then noticed for the first time the stout man in a tweed suit. He was blocking the Baron's way, with great deference, it is true, but none the less effectually.

"The Baron Kerker?" he inquired, politely. "An honor, indeed, gracious sir. This way, Volkmar," and two other men in plain clothes came up from behind and took their stations on either side of the financier.

The Baron understood, and so did I. Under the stimulus of a reward of one hundred thousand francs these intelligent gentlemen had taken it upon themselves to rescue the kidnapped king of the Bourse from his humiliating captivity. It was of no use to make denial—they knew the Baron, and they also knew their business. With entire respect, but with irresistible force, the three detectives began to edge their prisoner little by little out of the crowd and away from the train. But the Baron was not to be taken without a struggle, and, recovering from his first surprise, he shook himself free and jumped forward. The stout man received the shock obsequiously, and at the same time contrived to turn the Baron off at nearly a right angle to his projected course. It was excellent "interference," but I too knew something of that trick from those old-time Thanksgiving Days on Manhattan Field. In an instant I had jumped behind the Baron and had clasped him about the waist. There was a crash, and the stout man went down, while the man on the right fell back, disabled for the moment by that sharp jab with the elbow point that is so effective in blocking off a too eager opponent. We were all but clear, with the door of our carriage before us. I jumped aside and wrenched it open.

"In with you, Baron," I cried, for already the train was moving.

The third man was close up. He forgot himself so far as to place a detaining hand upon the Baron's coat-sleeve.

"But, monsieur—" he began.

"My compliments," roared the Baron, and hit straight out from the shoulder. The secret-service philanthropist fell into a disorganized heap, and Stephan and I pulled the Baron on to the foot-board as the train rolled out of the station.

"The scoundrel!" panted the Baron. "Tried to deprive me of my vacation, did he, and expecting me to pay for the damage done? When I am ready to go back to Kerker & Company I shall rescue myself and claim the reward of my partners. Have a frankfurter?"

Of course it had been Madame Verriker who had prepared this agreeable interlude for us, by means of a telegram from Rhodopolis to the police department of Mitkoff. She could hardly hope to detain either du Midi or myself by this sham rescue of the Baron's person, and certainly it was too late in the day to expect that he would fulfil that old financial agreement. Probably her idea had been simply to punish the Baron for the part he had taken in thwarting her plans. If the Baron had been rescued the reward of a hundred thousand francs would have to be paid, and it would cost the Baron, as senior partner, a large proportion of the whole. No wonder that the financier had prayed to be delivered from his friends.

"A word with you, Excellenza," said Stephan, at my elbow.

"Well?"

"A despatch has just been received, saying that the revolutionists were advancing towards the railway. I overheard the commander of the soldiers talking with the guard ahead there."

Action at last! This was good news; our friends would be coming to meet us.

"And so the train will run through to Kar without making any stops. The orders are to pass the dangerous point at Nissa at full-speed."

Indeed! But this was not so pleasant. If the Nissa stop was to be cut out, how were we to leave the train? Must we remain quietly shut up in our compartment until we were within the walls of Kar, and delivered like so many valuable express packages to Jehan and Captain Coventry? We looked at each other in dismay.

CHAPTER XXI

THE "RED COCK" CROWS

STEPHAN is a resolute fellow, and his clever plan seems feasible. Just beyond Nissa there is a heavy up-grade of a mile or more, ending with a tunnel through the summit of the ridge. After the train has entered the tunnel he proposes to step out upon the foot-board and cut loose our carriage, which, as you will remember, is attached at the end of the train. We shall be carried back by the force of gravity to Nissa and to our friends, while the rest of the train goes on to Kar.

"You are sure that you can cut out the connections?" I inquired.

"Perfectly, Excellenza. I worked when a boy for two years in the machine-shops at Mitkoff."

"But we shall be smashed to pieces running backward down that steep grade."

"There is a braking-wheel on this coach, Excellenza."

Really there is no reason why we should not make the attempt. The tunnel makes the success of the ruse almost certain, for in the darkness the loss of the carriage will not be noticed at first, and the down-grade will be responsible for the rest. And so it is decided.

Three o'clock, and, as Stephan had predicted, we are passing the straggling little village of Nissa at express speed. We looked eagerly out of the windows for any sign of the revolutionary forces. As I live! there is the flutter of a black and orange guidon far down the dusty road. It must be the advance guard of General Ghika's cavalry. Fifteen minutes later and we should have found the railway line in their possession.

Upon reflection, though, I am inclined to think that matters are better as they are. Our engineer, on finding the line obstructed or torn up, would certainly have come to a stop at a respectful distance, and then have backed his train the four or five miles into Soulian territory. As it is, we have only to consider the contingency of Stephan's falling off the foot-board or between the buffers.

The speed slackened as the train struck the heavy up-grade, but we were still going too fast to run the risk of a broken leg by jumping. Patience! and we should soon be making our entrance into Ætolian company comfortably seated in our private car and with the dignity becoming our importance.

The darkness of the tunnel fell like a curtain across the windows, and Stephan swung out upon the foot-board. Two, three minutes, and then I felt that our car was gradually slowing down. Now we had come to a stand-still—we were beginning to move backward. Daylight again, and Stephan, black with dust and smoke, runs quickly along the foot-board and mans the brake on the rear of our carriage. Brave boy! He has done the trick with consummate neatness. The carriage rushes down the incline, rocking from side to side.

Ping!

It was the unmistakable sound of a modern military rifle. Again it came, and yet again. But who could be firing the shots, and whence did they come? A perfect fusillade this time, and now it was certain that the firing proceeded from a point directly behind our carriage, bearing in mind that we were now running in the contrary direction.

The Baron smiled knowingly.

"What is it, Baron?"

"Why, I ventured to make an amendment to Stephan's plan. I suggested it to him just before we entered the tunnel, and it seems that he accepted the hint."

Crash!

It was regular volley-firing, and du Midi and I involuntarily jumped up and stood ducking our heads absurdly. The Baron, on the contrary, proceeded to stretch himself at full length on the floor. "They may possibly take a fancy to throw some lead in this direction," he said, calmly, "but it is not likely. The Soulian regular is an unimaginative animal."

"Kindly explain, dear Baron."

"Nothing, except that it was just as easy to cut out *two* carriages as one, and the van immediately ahead of ours contains the treasure-chest."

"And also the guard of soldiers," I retorted. "It's something like carrying off a bee's nest, isn't it?"

"Well, there's nothing like honey," replied the Baron.

It was indeed a brilliant stroke, and as a matter of fact we ran but a small extra risk. The soldiers had, of course, discovered that something must be wrong, but they were securely locked up in their van, and were stolidly contenting themselves with file-firing through the windows. There was neither sense nor argument in this sort of rejoinder, but the Soulian soldier was doing his duty according to his lights, and it was not our ammunition that he was wasting. Let him bang away so long as it may seem good to him.

A crowd of wild-looking horsemen were galloping up and down the one street of Nissa as Stephan brought our "special" to a stop. Evidently they looked upon our arrival with suspicion, as well they might. What devil's train was this that had come out of the enemy's country, with no visible means of propulsion and towing that thundering volcano of a treasure-van? Some new and terrible engine of warfare, without a doubt. "To arms, brothers!"

The revolutionaries rallied nobly, and now a shower of bullets spattered spitefully around us. Luckily our patriotic friends were firing too high, but the situation was an uncomfortable one. Stephan was doing his best to enlighten his fellow-countrymen as to our identity, but in the noise and confusion his shouts and gesticulations passed unheeded. Then I remembered that I had a small Ætolian flag in my hand-bag. I routed it out and gave it to Stephan. He waved it vigorously, and the firing stopped. An officer rode up cautiously and prepared to investigate. The Soulian soldiers in the treasure-van were still discharging volleys with monotonous regularity, but the direction of their fire was never altered, and it was consequently possible to approach our end without danger. A few words of explanation from Stephan and the officer appeared at the door of our saloon-carriage cap in hand.

"The gentlemen expected by the General?" he said, inquiringly, in good French.

I managed in a few words to make the situation fairly comprehensible, and the young officer laughed heartily and invited us to descend.

"General Ghika is with the main body, and should be here within the hour," he went on. "You had better remain with me, gentlemen, but, in the mean time, what are we to do with the moving fort that you have brought along with you. *Peste!* My ear-drums are cracking already, and they have turned the railway station into a perfect sieve. I was instructed to have it put in order for the General's headquarters."

"Uncouple the van and have it pushed up the track for a hundred yards or so," suggested the Baron. "Then the 'yellow-legs' can use up their cartridge-belts without annoying any one, and after that you can bag them at your leisure."

Captain Narbo, who is, by-the-way, a graduate of Saint Cyr, and a fine specimen of the Ætolian gentle class, agrees to the proposition. With Stephan's assistance the van is uncoupled, and a score of strong arms manage to get it in motion and finally shunted off on a side-track above the water-tank. As the Soulians are locked up in their fortress, it is impossible for them to escape or to carry off the treasure, and after the bees have spent their stings, it will be an easy task to take possession of the honey. The "yellow-legs" must be thoroughly disturbed in mind by this time, but they stick like wax to their self-imposed job of file-firing, and may be supposed to be sustained by the consciousness that they are performing their duty.

"In the morning," remarks the Baron, "we can begin to pay off our brave men. May I be permitted to offer my services in a clerical capacity," he adds, modestly. And forthwith the Baron Kerker is commissioned Paymaster-General of the Ætolian army, and authorized to open his ledger with the contents of the Soulian treasure-chest—when he gets it.

Captain Narbo has been ordered to destroy the railway line, and his men are at work tearing up the metals. I suggest that the rails may be made permanently useless by roasting them over fires built of the wooden sleepers. The heat will twist and warp the iron out of shape, so that it cannot be relaid. It will be a severe blow to Jehan to cut off any further communication with his Soulian friends, and I am surprised that this obvious strategic measure was not adopted long ago. And then I remember how General Czareska's hands have been tied. General Ghika, although a good fighter, knows but little of the art of war, and so there has been mismanagement everywhere, and the discouragement of impending defeat hangs over all. A desperate situation—and are we in time to save it?

The advance-guard of the main body are beginning to come in, and the preparations for the bivouac make up a lively scene. Odd-looking soldiers, these poorly dressed peasants, their obsolete fire-arms eked out with scythes and bill-hooks. But they are a wiry lot of men, and even though they may be undisciplined and poorly equipped, the enemy is not much better off. Moreover, I doubt if Jehan's mercenaries will fight as determinedly as these patriots, burning to free their necks from the Soulian yoke, and soon to be inspired by the sight of their true and lawful sovereign at their head. It will be mediæval rather than modern warfare—a little drama of the Middle Ages to be played to the death upon this picturesque Ætolian stage. It should be an interesting performance, and I am proud of being included in the cast.

We have seen and talked with General Ghika, and the situation is beginning to clear up. He has but four or five thousand men with him, but they are all veterans, and the presence of Prince Infelix has put new hope into every heart. "We shall win! We shall win!" is heard on every side, and the tide of patriotism is rising fast. Already signal-fires are blazing on the mountain-peaks, and mounted messengers are spurring in every direction. By to-morrow we shall have ten thousand men to fill up our scanty ranks. None too soon, seeing that to-morrow is July 9th.

General Czareska and mademoiselle are not with the army, but are occupying their own château of Saint Ilo, a scant league from the walls of Kar. It seems that the General has been unwell for the past few days, and it was thought best to keep him out of the saddle. At his own house he can be made more comfortable than anywhere else, and mademoiselle is of course taking care of him.

"But the position is an exposed one," said du Midi, frowning.

"Perhaps not so much as your Highness thinks," returned General Ghika, with easy assurance. "Our scouts have informed us that Jehan has withdrawn all his forces behind the city gates. The country-side is as bare as an egg."

"What force is there at the château?" I inquired.

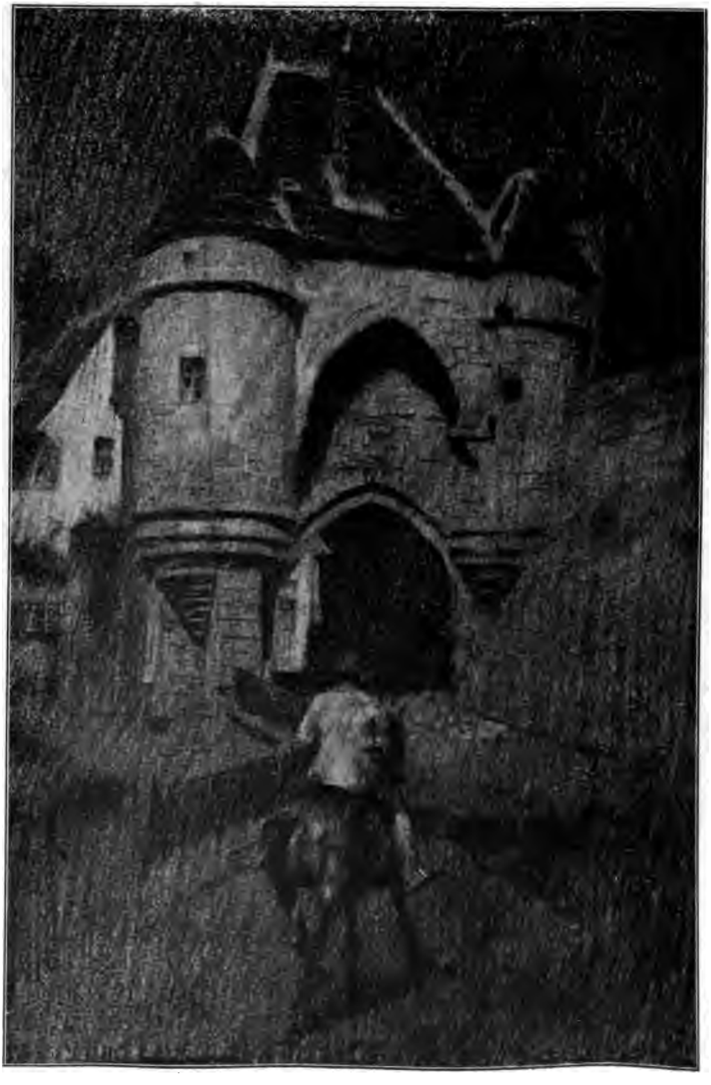
The General had to admit that it was only a small detachment of infantry—a mere guard of honor. But what could happen? The enemy, as he had said, had shown no disposition for offensive campaign. They were safe behind the walls of Kar, and they had only to wait patiently for their deliverance to come to them.

"How far is it to the château?" demanded du Midi.

"Ten miles, your Highness, and a rough road."

"Mr. Cary and I will spend the night there, and you will detail a troop of cavalry as our escort. And now, General, for a soldier's supper!"

General Ghika is probably quite right in asserting that our friends are safely housed within the thick stone walls of the Château Saint Ilo, but I am glad,



"I DREW REIN, ALONE"

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nevertheless, that we are to rejoin them at once, and I can understand du Midi's impatience to redeem himself in the eyes of General Czareska—and perhaps in those of his daughter. The thought gives me a keen little stab of pain, and I crush it down as best I may. Shall I never come to the end of the dark passage in which I have been wandering so long? I only know that where Irma is, there must be the light; and so I stumble on, guided by the feeble glimmer that from time to time is vouchsafed me.

It was long after midnight before we were finally in the saddle, and, as General Ghika had informed us, the road was anything but smooth. The night, too, was intensely dark, and, until I learned to let my horse pick his own way, my steed and I were very far from being one. Naturally the intelligent quadruped objected to being forced into ditches and gully-holes, and as his protests generally culminated in an abrupt stoppage, with his forelegs planted widely apart, I spent most of the first quarter of an hour uncomfortably spread-eagled upon his neck. After that I gave him his head and we got along better.

It must have been about half after two when we entered a deep defile, the crags on either side ominously overhanging our path. And the darkness! I could not even see my horse's ears.

"Courage!" called back Narbo, for the young captain commanded our party in person. "The next turn and we shall be out in the open, and a scant mile away from the castle walls. If it were moonlight we should be able to see the château."

"And there comes 'Old Oliver,'" I answer, cheerfully, as we swing around a shoulder of the hills. A sullen glare hangs low on the horizon; the moon of war is rising blood-red.

"The moon! and in the west!" mutters Stephan.

And then we all spur madly forward as a great sheaf of sparks stands out upon the midnight sky. The "red cock" is crowing from the ridge-pole of the Château Czareska.

My horse is the best animal in the whole cavalcade, and I draw rein alone before the great gates of the castle. They stand ajar, and pinned by a poniard-point to one of the heavy oaken planks is something small and white, and oblong in shape—a man's visiting-card. It reads, in the fashionable block type:

"MAJOR ARTHUR COVENTRY,

"IMPERIAL SOULIAN ENGINEERS, ÆTOLIAN CONTINGENT."

and underneath, in pencil, are scrawled the initials "P. P C."

CHAPTER XXII

THROUGH THE DRAGON GATE

DIMITRI, the aged major-domo, came to meet us as we rode into the court-yard of the château. By some miracle he had escaped the notice of the Soulian butchers; he alone remained of the garrison and of the household. It had been a clean sweep, and the story was soon told.

The Soulian attack had been made during the early evening, and the surprise had been a complete one. Within ten minutes the defenders lay dead at their posts or had sought refuge in flight. The Soulian leader had restrained his men from unnecessary violence, but had made the General and mademoiselle prisoners of war, and carried them away with him, presumably to Kar. As for the fire, that had probably been started by one of the soldiers, angered at the prohibition against plundering. He had evidently stolen unobserved into the dismantled east wing and ignited the forage stored there. The fire had only broken out within the last few minutes, and praise be to God! it was still confined to the east wing, and the rain was coming. This, Dimitri's story.

The deluge was almost inconceivable, but it did us the friendly office of extinguishing the flames. Stephan started back to Nissa with peremptory orders for Ghika to advance at the first streak of dawn, and du Midi and I, throwing ourselves down on the bearskin rugs in the great hall, slept like dead men.

It was seven o'clock when Narbo touched me on the shoulder. General Ghika and the Baron had arrived in person, and the army was on the move. Breakfast was soon ready, and we gathered around it to discuss and mature our plans. We must think and act quickly, for to-day is the 9th of July.

Having summed up the chances pro and con, it seems that but two courses of action are open to us. We can either stand off at long range and batter the walls of Kar into dust with our one piece of artillery, the terrible dynamite-gun, or we can carry the city by assault in the good old way. Odd that the modern and the mediæval should be so closely associated in our little company. We have but one piece of artillery, but that one is the dynamite-gun, the last word in warfare. And our rank and file are armed with bush-hooks and with home-made pikes.

Now while the dynamite-gun is an enormously effective weapon, it is equally terrifying in its uncertainty. It may work perfectly, and in that case we may expect to see the white flag run up within fifteen minutes after the first shot. And again, a shell may get jammed in the tube and the monster become ten times more dangerous to its masters than to the enemy. Finally, it is twenty miles to the rear, and the storm has made the roads virtually impassable. It will be good fortune and good management if the gun can be placed in position before to-morrow morning. And to-morrow is the 10th of July. The dynamite-gun is our best card, but we must face the contingency of not being able to play it.

There remains, then, the question of assault, a forlorn hope, perhaps, and yet to be considered carefully. We have plenty of scaling-ladders, and, from all that we can learn, the artillery defences of the city are of an obsolete and useless pattern. It will be a hand-to-hand struggle, but we shall outnumber the defenders ten to one, and the very audacity of the move may assure its success. Obviously though it will be necessary to obtain more complete information about the nature of the defences. The weak points, if there be any, can only be noted from the inside.

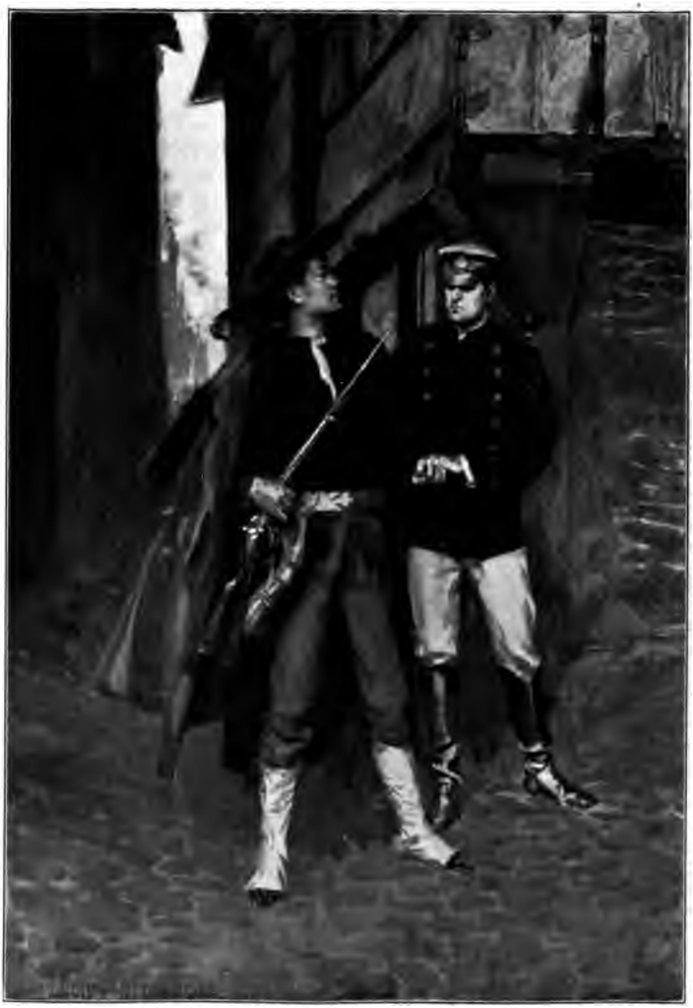
Du Midi—for I never can remember to think of him as the Prince—has given me permission to make the attempt. It is now nearly noon, and there are no signs of the main body marching up from Nissa. It is plain that the final assault must be postponed until to-morrow morning, and in the mean time I shall be gathering useful information, and perhaps have the chance of opening communication with mademoiselle. With my face stained with walnut-juice, and dressed in Soulian regimentals, I run but small risk of being suspected. As to my lingual deficiencies, I will cut the knot by pretending to be a deaf mute. Among the disorganized mob that constitutes the garrison of Kar one soldier more or less is as nothing, and the only real danger is in coming into contact with the two persons who know me—Mrs. Verriker and Coventry.

An hour later I had made my way to the borders of the little plateau, from which the road lies clear to the city gate. It would hardly do to step out boldly into the open and seek admittance to the city as a straggler from Coventry's raid of the night before. In such case the scrutiny would probably be more than I could safely bear. I had hoped for the opportunity of a diversion, under cover of which I might slip through the toils ; and fortune again favored me. A troop of Soulian dismounted cavalrymen were cutting forage in a hay-field bordering on the wood in which I lay concealed. I had only to give the word to Captain Narbo, who with his Ætolian irregular cavalry was waiting half a mile to the rear.

It was hardly a skirmish even, for the Soulians had no stomach for a fight. As Narbo's gallant little force broke cover and charged, the enemy hastily retired towards the city, leaving the laden forage mules to break away in all directions. I had made good use of my legs, sure that every eye would be otherwise occupied than in watching my insignificant self, and I found no difficulty in mingling with the crowd as it skurried back to the protection of the walls. A few scattering shots were fired, and Narbo distinguished himself by cutting down the two gigantic troopers who were sullenly bringing up the Soulian rear-guard. Finally the artillerymen on the walls succeeded in putting a light gun into action, and the little band of patriots drew off and completed their reconnoissance of the city's defences from a safer range. Jostled and buffeted about, I am swept along with the struggling tide that chokes the city's gates. And then they close behind me with a resonant clang. I am in Kar, and it behooves me to walk warily, as one who carries his head in his hands.

The capital city of Ætolia covers some two hundred acres of ground, and in its general aspect it is a citadel rather than a town. It is a bit of the Middle Ages set down among these pine-covered hills, a feudal stronghold, and yet only a half-score hours from Vienna. The cathedral and the legislative buildings stand upon the public square, but the palace is entirely isolated from all other buildings, and occupies the entire north end of the square. It is an enormous block of buildings, but rather a fortalice than a palace, the Bastille and not the Tuileries.

So far everything is mediæval, and yet within the



"'DON'T BE A FOOL,' HE SAID, IN A WHISPER"

last two or three years Kar has undergone the process of discovery at the hands of the makers of guide-books. It is now the "most picturesque town in Europe," and the fame of its warm baths increases daily. And so has come about the railway from Rhodopolis and other innovations of steam-heated civilization. They look oddly out of place, these smart-looking cafés with Parisian names, sandwiched between tottering gables and blackened façades. And yet even the railway must not presume too far. Under extraordinary pressure the company finally obtained permission to lay a single line of rails through the Dragon Gate and up to the great square of Saint Michael. But this is a privilege jealously qualified. The two trains that arrive and depart daily may run up to the square for the convenience of their passengers, but no other railway business can be carried on within the sacred walls. The freight-yards, the round-houses, even the business offices of the company, are all outside the city. The actual terminus of the railway is a full half-mile the other side of the Dragon Gate. This contempt for the purely utilitarian amuses me; it would have charmed Mr. Ruskin. I need hardly add that all railway traffic has been suspended for the time being; with Nissa in our hands and the line destroyed, the company must await the progress of events.

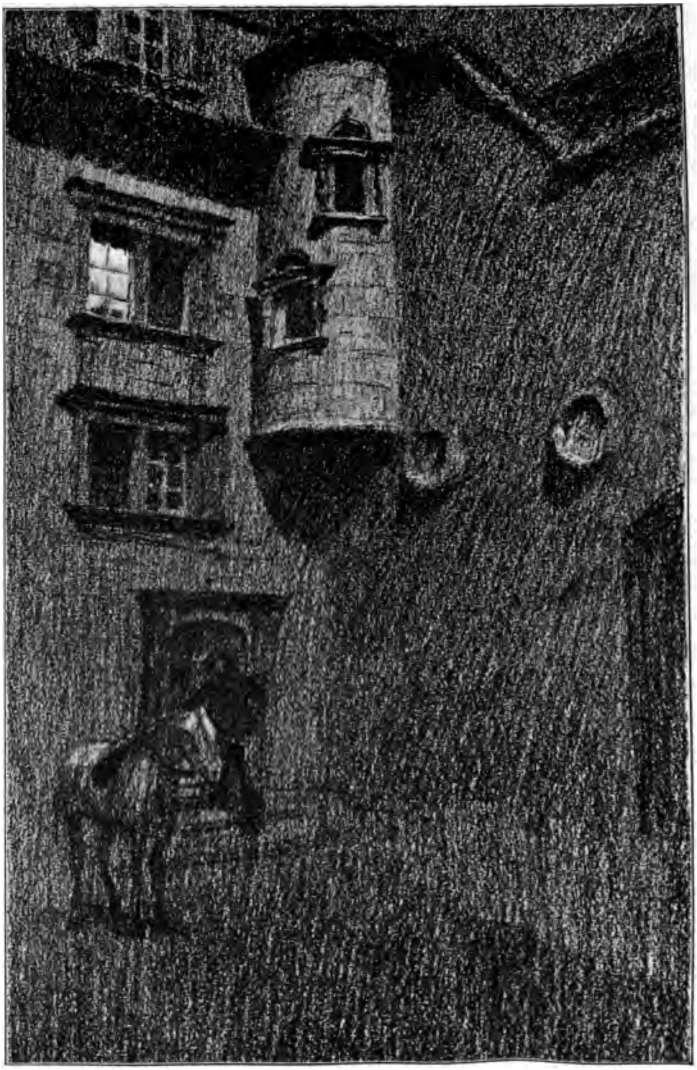
No one took any notice of me as I made my way to the square of Saint Michael. The side streets, narrow, crooked, and dirty, were generally deserted. Evidently the burghers of Kar deem it wise to remain within doors until the question of over-lordship has been decided. But the square was crowded with men and animals, soldiers, and camp-followers.

These Soulian soldiers apparently do what is right in their own eyes, and their officers shrug their shoulders and wait philosophically for the fighting to begin. Discipline there is none, and only in the guard duty on the walls is there any appearance of military order and activity. Even there the preparations seem to me to be ridiculously inadequate, and I should feel immensely encouraged if I did not know that the patriot forces are even more poorly equipped for the offence.

Little by little I managed to make a thorough inspection of the line of fortifications, and having completed the circle, I sat down in an empty hallway to eat my luncheon of bread and cheese and to review the results of my observation.

The more I think it over the less cheerful grows the prospect. Kar is a city set upon a hill, and its general situation is not unlike that at Jerusalem, only more so. On three sides the ground falls so rapidly away from the walls that nothing less surefooted than a goat or a chamois could find a way of approach. The fourth side contains the Dragon Gate, and is the only possible point for an assault. The pieces mounted upon the walls are only old smooth-bores, but they are still cannon, and the scaling-ladders would have to be planted within point-blank range. Forlorn indeed would be the hope that essayed to mount those shaking rungs. It looks as though we should have to stand or fall by the performance of the dynamite-gun.

It was nearly sunset, and time for me to think of getting out of the bear's den. Of course the gates were shut and guarded, and I could not think of passing that barrier. But under my outer clothing I had a thirty-foot knotted silken rope wrapped about my waist, and with its aid I could make the descent of the walls. It would surely not be difficult after nightfall to elude these careless sentries; give



"I FOLLOWED HIM THROUGH A SIDE ENTRANCE."

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me but two clear minutes, and I should be safely over the parapet. In the mean time it was my business to keep under cover.

With everything to lose and nothing to gain I must needs strain my good-luck to the breaking-point. I had the fancy to make my way once again to the square, and, if possible, to obtain some idea of where the General and mademoiselle were confined. I had no fears for their personal safety—Jehan had sense enough for that, with the commissioner of the Powers so near at hand; but if ever our time came, it might be convenient to know the precise whereabouts of our friends. Undoubtedly they would be regarded as prisoners of State, and as such they would probably be quartered in some part of the citadel-palace. Perhaps I might be lucky enough to mark them down even closer, and at all events I would try. A foolish experiment, but remember that it was over ten days since I had seen Irma de Czareska.

The Via Roma runs from the Dragon Gate to the square of Saint Michael, and is the principal thoroughfare of the city. A barricade of paving-stones was being built under the direction of a Soulian officer of engineers, so as to completely close the street, and the work presented quite a formidable appearance. Even if we succeeded in forcing the gates there would still be this obstacle to overcome, and with the adjacent houses filled with Soulian riflemen, the assault should be a bloody one. The barricade had been well planned, and I felt inclined to compliment the Soulian engineer upon his skill, even while regretting that he had had occasion to exercise it. A moment later he turned and walked over to where I was standing. It was Coventry, and I tried to slip back into the crowd. But he would not have it so.

"You seem interested in our modest little barricade, my dear Cary." He spoke in English, and then, without giving me a chance either to disclaim or acknowledge my identity, he took me by the arm and forced me gently through the crowd and up the street. I thought, in one mad moment, of resistance.

"Don't be a fool," he said, in a whisper, while his hand renewed its pressure upon my arm. "You must realize that you are absolutely in my power, and that the moment you open your mouth you are pronouncing your own death sentence. If I had only wanted to stop your meddling with other people's business, I need not have taken you aside. Now that I am offering you a chance, you had better accept it without insisting upon particulars."

There was hard common-sense in this, and I walked along in silence. Arrived at the square, Coventry made directly for the palace, and I followed a step or two behind, as befitted my inferior rank. I made up my mind that I was to be subjected to an examination, possibly at the hands of Jehan himself. We passed the guard at the gateway and entered the court-yard.

"There, in the third balcony window!" whispered my companion.

I looked up. A tall, handsomely dressed man was standing in the deep embrasure of the window, with a parrot perched upon his fingers. He was evidently teaching the bird some sentence—an odd occupation for a man in his position. For this was Jehan, the usurper.

It was not a pleasant face, and even as I looked it hardened into sudden cruelty. The puffy white hands tightened about the neck of the hapless bird, and the next instant an inert mass of red and green feathers hurtled through the air and fell at our feet.

The King acknowledged with an indifferent gesture Coventry's military salute, and turned back into the room.

"This way," beckoned Coventry. I followed him through a side entrance and up a broad staircase. He stopped before a door and produced a pass-key.

"My private apartments," he explained. "If you will be good enough to enter, we can talk over comfortably the business in hand."

I was about to comply, when some one brushed against me in the semi-darkness of the corridor and hurried on with the briefest of apologies. The contact had been but momentary, and yet the impression received had been a distinctly unpleasant one.

"Who was that?" I asked.

Coventry looked up in surprise. "I did not notice," he said, briefly, as he held the door open for me to enter. I waited a moment until the retreating footsteps had died away down the long corridor, and then passed into the room.

CHAPTER XXIII

AN EXCHANGE OF CONFIDENCES

THE day was warm, and yet there was a wood-fire burning on the hearth. Sitting close beside it was a woman, Mrs. Verriker. We greeted each other in silence. She was making a pretence at working upon an embroidery-frame, but there was no silk in her needle, and she looked pale and tired. She rose as though to leave the room.

"No, don't go, Mary," said Coventry. "Perhaps you can help me in bringing Mr. Cary to a reasonable state of mind. Hang it, man!" he continued, turning abruptly to me, "why should there be any beating about the bush between old friends. It won't surprise you much to know that Arthur Coventry is the same person as Arthur Coventry Verriker, late a captain in her Majesty's service, and the true and lawful husband of this lady. I'll engage, Mary, that you have the certificate at hand to show Cary, if he don't care to accept my word."

"But I thought that Captain Verriker—" There I stopped in confusion. I remembered that there had always been a mystery about Mrs. Verriker's married life. Something worse than widowhood—a scandal?

"Yes; the same Captain Verriker who went under a dozen years ago. You remember there was some nasty talk about a sitting at 'Van John' and an extra ace of diamonds, and it was quite true. There's the pasteboard now that spoiled a man's life," and Coventry extracted an old playing-card from his wallet and threw it down upon the table. He tried to speak with bravado, but there was a sub-conscious note in his voice that belied its assumed indifference. He must have seen the sympathy in my face, for he went on quickly:

"But before God! Cary, I was innocent—at least of that kind of thing. I don't deny that I made a good thing out of play, for I was poor and the mess bills in the —th run high. I was a gentleman rook if you like, but there was never a whisper against my honor until that night when there was an ace too many in the pack. And where it came from only God knows."

Mrs. Verriker had risen and crossed over to her husband's side. She lightly brushed an infinitesimal speck of dust from his coat-sleeve, and all the undying tenderness and faith of a good woman lay in that simple action. I turned away my head, and when I looked around again she was gone.

"It was she who saved me from myself," he went on, after a little pause. "You can guess well enough what happened, for the evidence against me was damning, and there is no mercy for a sinner against the code. Naturally we went to the Continent, and one must live, you know. Those were shady years, but when you have once felt the tar-brush, a touch or so more does not matter much. Finally I drifted into the Caliph's service, the genteel Botany Bay for army black sheep, and I had a good deal to do with the underground negotiations between Soulia and this hound Jehan. Of course we kept a sharp eye upon the Czareskas while they were living in England, for Jehan knew well enough that the day would come when a reckoning of the old debt would be presented at his door. It was an exciting game, and since it kept me from thinking much about myself, I played it with all my heart. Finally, in the latter part of March, we received word that General Czareska was about to go to Paris, and I knew that the decisive hour had struck.

"As I figured it out, the immense potential value of the 'Cardinal's Rose' was the master card in the pack. No matter who held it at the start, the game would go to the side that actually played it. And so, faithful to my employer's interests, I laid my plans.

"Mrs. Verriker had entered the Czareska household some two or three months back, in the capacity of companion to mademoiselle. Her information was always of the utmost value to us who pulled the strings at Paris, and, indeed, she played her part to perfection, as you know yourself. And so the 'Cardinal's Rose' went into my hands that March afternoon on Dover pier, and all the rest seemed plain sailing. You can hardly blame du Midi for stepping into my web. It was a glittering one, and he was but a boy; it was easy enough to persuade him that old Czareska was in his dotage, and that he, du Midi, must take matters into his own hands if anything was to be accomplished.

"At any rate, we had secured the great ruby, and the money should go to bolstering up Jehan's shaking throne instead of buying machine-guns for the revolutionists. The bogus 'Rose' kept du Midi from suspecting our double-dealing, and I had almost completed my bargain with the money-lenders when you happened to come along, you, a beggarly Yankee scribbler, who had only to stick your thumb into the pie and pick out the biggest plum of all.

"No, I'm not flattering you; I am simply pointing out that the luck has been all on your side from the beginning. I had mistrusted you from the moment of your appearance, although it was some time before I could be certain of how much you really knew. But I could not fight against your lucky star. I had you at my mercy when I held my buttonless foil at your throat. I knew you when, as Baron Kerker's footman, you helped me on with my paletot. And yet you beat me out. I was up against it, as you Americans say.

"Well, your great coup came off, and I was obliged to hurry back to Kar checkmated. I had neither the great ruby nor the odd millions that represented its value. All I could do was to take off my coat and jump into the fight. So the matter stands, *voilà tout.*"

"Well?" and I looked at him searchingly. Coventry smiled.

"Confession is good for the soul, my dear Cary, but I don't mind admitting that I have made mine rather with an eye to business. But have a cigarette." He pushed the box of Egyptians across the table and lit one himself.

"As a matter of fact," he continued, "I am out of favor here. Jehan believes that I have played him false, and he is only keeping me on now for the sake of my technical services. There's nobody else in Kar who has the slightest knowledge of military engineering, and so for the time being I am a distinguished person. As you see, I am even accorded the honor of having a suite of rooms assigned to me in the palace.

"Now Jehan believes that I have the jewel or its equivalent in my possession, and if he once pulls out of this black hole my life would be a mighty poor risk for any insurance company. Strange things may happen beyond the Balkans without any questions being asked, and I have no friends at the Soulian court. Finally, the commissioner of the Powers will be in Kar at precisely noon to-morrow, July 10th."

"How do you know that?" I asked, quickly.

"All the telegraph wires do not run by way of Nissa, my dear fellow. The line *via* Kavan is still working, and one end of it runs directly into the office of the Soulian Minister of Foreign Relations. The commissioner is now at Kavan with General Sarkof and a Soulian army corps. Kavan is four hours' march from Kar, and the orders to advance will be sent at precisely eight o'clock to-morrow morning."

"And the commissioner of the Powers?"

"Is instructed to observe the *status quo* whatever it may be. If Kar is in the hands of the patriots, du Midi will be recognized as King, both *de jure* and *de facto;* if Jehan can hold his own until noon his title will be confirmed by the single voice of the Great Powers. You see that the situation is very simple. Can you take advantage of it?"

Well, since confidences are in order, I may as well speak frankly, and I did so.

"Without artillery we can hardly hope to carry the city by assault, and the dynamite-gun is a terribly uncertain quantity. The chances are against us."

"Precisely, Mr. Cary; you are an intelligent man, and, above all, you are a reasonable one. Let me now inform you that our artillery is not composed entirely of the out-of-date pieces that you have seen mounted upon the walls of Kar. We have at least fifty Maxims ready for use, and they are now being placed in position. Look here!"

We stepped to a window commanding the side street and drew the curtains. It was still light enough for me to see an ox-cart, into which some Soulian soldiers were loading a machine-gun. A Maxim, as Coventry had said, and there were half a dozen others of the same pattern lined up against the outer wall of the machine-shop that evidently served as a rough-and-ready armory. I must have looked my chagrin as I realized that the scale was indisputably turning against us.

"But what's a gun without powder and shot?" said Coventry, with an odd inflection in his voice. "Come this way, Cary, and I'll give you another object-lesson."

He led the way down into the court-yard and over to the enormous gateway tower which afforded the only entrance to the outside world. We entered the guard-room on the left, in which half a dozen soldiers sat playing at cards and smoking, in complete indifference to discipline; indeed, not one of them took the trouble to rise and salute as Coventry passed. An officer more or less, what did it matter? But Coventry took no notice, motioning me to follow him.

At the far end of the room was a door which he unlocked with a pass-key. Descending the stairway, we came upon the entrance to a vault. A lighted lantern hung suspended to the iron gateway, and before it, seated on a packing-box, was a Soulian soldier. He was fast asleep, and Coventry roused him with a kick that was anything but gentle.

"Is this how you keep your post, you Balkan pig? Quick now, unless you want to find yourself up against a dead wall with a dozen rifle-barrels looking at you!"

The man jumped to his feet, and then, recognizing his officer, started in to excuse his obvious neglect of duty.

"The key," demanded Coventry, with renewed impatience.

The soldier drew an enormous key from the breast of his dirty blouse, and proceeded to unlock the grating. We entered a narrow passage, and I stumbled along behind Coventry as best I might. He carried the lantern, but its light was feeble, and the footing was none of the best. Twenty paces or so and the passage debouched into a large chamber, apparently hewn out of the living rock. Coventry set the lantern on a shelf high above our heads and bade me look about me.

The place seemed to be a store-room of some kind, and I especially noticed a pyramid of small kegs of a peculiar pattern. Then I recognized them as powder barrels, and Coventry nodded an assent. He stepped up to one of the kegs and removed a portion of the heading. The powder was of the old-fashioned variety, black and fine-grained. But it was certainly gunpowder, and Coventry stood calmly smoking a cigarette within two feet of the opened keg. He smiled, and deliberately flung the little roll of smouldering fire into the centre of the dull black mass.

Such is the power of the imagination that for the moment I actually saw the solid walls toppling upon my head. And yet nothing whatever had happened. The lighted cigarette was dying out as it lay harmless and ineffectual upon the naked powder. "You see," said my companion, "that our Soulian army contractors understand their business. They have supplied us here with a really excellent quality of black sand, and the only keg of genuine powder was the particular one prepared for the convenience of the inspecting officer. I have tested all the others myself."

Heaped in another corner were a number of boxes filled with old-fashioned paper rifle-shells. Coventry broke one open and held the flame of a vesta in contact with the explosive charge. The stuff spluttered feebly, something after the fashion of the "sizzer" that an American boy is accustomed to manufacture out of a discarded fire-cracker. "They contain barely enough explosive to expel themselves from the guns," continued Coventry, "and the same is true of the cartridges supplied for the Maxim belts. The corruption extends everywhere — brown-paper shoes, shoddy clothing, lead bayonets, but it is useless to enumerate details. The Soulian forces in Kar would be at the mercy of a single company of French or even Spanish regulars. That is, if I choose to have it so," he concluded, meaningly.

"Then there is another supply of serviceable ammunition," I hazarded.

"Precisely, and as head of the ordnance department it lies with me which of the two is served out upon this occasion. But even then the walls are thick and high, and your dynamite-gun may not arrive, or may fail in its service. Only one thing is certain to happen, and that is the coming of the commissioner and Sarkof. You may be sure that they will be here on time."

"Yes?" and I looked at him steadily.

"I am coming to that," he returned. "Briefly, then, there is another entrance besides the Dragon Gate to the sacred city of Kar, and I have been keeping the secret of its existence for just such an opportunity to turn it to advantage. If I choose to let you into the secret of my little wicket gate, a couple of hundred men can be quietly introduced at any time within the walls, and I need not enlarge upon the strategic importance of a position in the enemy's rear. Kar will be in your hands within an hour of the firing of the first shot to-morrow morning, and with the Soulian cartridge-belts filled with this dummy ammunition, your loss need not exceed a score of men."

"And your price?"

"The Cardinal's Rose."

"The Cardinal's Rose! How can we give something that we no longer possess? Is it even certain that the ruby is still in existence?"

"I will take the risk," he returned, lightly. "I dare say that our friend du Midi knows where to lay his hands upon it should occasion serve. You are simply to lay my proposition before him, and he ought not find it difficult to decide. Unless my offer is accepted, Infelix Agricola loses both the jewel and the crown which it once adorned. And I, having made my coup, may spend my declining years repenting of my sins. But I must have one more taste of cakes and ale before I put on the sackcloth.

"You understand the condition," he went on. "The 'Rose' must be delivered to me in person before I will move a step in the matter. I will send you out by the secret way, and wait for your return shortly before dawn. Upon the completion of the transaction, the ambuscading party shall have free entry, and the general attack may be begun at any time."

"And you?"

"I will look after myself. Perhaps a stray bullet from one of my own men, for the beggars hate me well enough for even that. But what would you? The stake is a big one, and afterwards—"

He stopped abruptly and put his hand to his throat as though the words were strangling there. And then with his eyes still fixed upon the floor:

"It's a blackleg business, even against a scoundrel like Jehan, but I must strike or be struck. For myself I don't care, but there is Mary; and for her sake I'd be willing to put in a few more years of this hell.

Some quiet little box in the States would do us, and she could go in for her charities—women are all alike, you know, in that."

He looked at his watch. "Nine o'clock, and time that you were off, if you are going to pull in the same boat with me. Is it yes or no, then?"

"Yes; but I too have a condition. You know where the prisoners are confined? Of course I mean General and Mademoiselle Czareska."

"Well?"

"And you have access to them? Very good; they must accompany me when I leave Kar to-night."

Coventry shook his head; but he saw that I was resolved, and he yielded.

"It more than doubles the risk," he said, slowly, "but you may be right about the necessity of obtaining the General's consent to the legal transfer of the ruby, and du Midi may not be willing to act without it. And, if you will do me the favor, I will ask to have Mary—Mrs. Verriker—join your party. I should feel easier if she were outside these black walls."

Of course I assented, and, our conference being concluded for the time being, we started to return to Coventry's apartments. Just outside the door of the guard-room stood an iron basket full of flaring pine-knots. As we passed within the circle of its radiance we came face to face with a man coming from the palace side of the court-yard. The recognition, on my part at least, was immediate and unqualified—the man was Maître Étienne Vauclot.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE TAPESTRIED CHAMBER

COVENTRY listened gravely while I rehearsed as briefly as I might the secret history of the "yellow house." That it was a genuine revelation to him I could not doubt for an instant, and the explanation that he gave in turn was entirely credible. Vauclot had acted for a long time as a secret agent for Soulia, and when Coventry came to Paris to take charge of the underground bureau he had found him useful in many ways. They had been political associates; the house in the Rue de Rennes was a convenient rendezvous, and all the rest follows naturally. The affair at No. 82 had not been permitted to get into the newspapers, and Coventry knew only that the house had been destroyed by fire and that Vauclot was missing, and presumably dead. Later on he had appeared at Kar, and had been given a small appointment in Jehan's personal service. "Some sort of spying business, I dare say," added Coventry, indifferently. "I never did like the man, and I haven't exchanged two words with him since he came here."

"Not even to ask why he left Paris?"

"Not even that."

"Do you suppose that he recognized you?" asked Coventry, after a short silence. "Now that you have shaved off your beard, and in those clothes—"

"He has such good cause to remember me," I answered, "that I am not indulging in any illusions. I am sure that he knew me."

"And consequently?"

"We may regard ourselves as under suspicion. Vauclot may have but little love for Jehan, but if I know the man, he would give much for the chance of paying off the score that is chalked up against me. And indifferently friendly as your relations may have been with him up to this point, you must now be prepared to find in him an active enemy."

"Well, it may be so, but I think that you exaggerate the peril. In the first place, he knows nothing—"

"But he can put two and two—that is, you and me—together," I interrupted.

"And in the second place, he can do nothing," he continued, calmly. "Take it easy, my dear fellow; we shall be busy enough with the things that will really happen before the night is over. And now, if you will follow me, I will take you to General Czareska."

As I had surmised, this feudal stronghold was prison as well as palace, and the apartments reserved for prisoners of state were situated at one end of this same wing in which Coventry had his suite. We passed down the long corridor and entered an anteroom belonging to the official apartments of the chief jailer. A few words from Coventry and a turnkey was ordered to conduct me to the rooms set aside for the use of the Czareskas.

"Only ten minutes, mind," whispered Coventry in my ear. "I will prepare Mrs. Verriker for the new move, and you must have the General and mademoiselle in readiness the instant that I return." He turned away, and I followed the jailer through the grated door of the prison corridor.

Mademoiselle looked up, her face white and startled, as the bolts shot back and I entered the apartment. Then she sprang to her feet, and we stood waiting for the fellow to make his clumsy exit. How small her hand was and how cold! It fluttered in mine as though it had been some frightened bird and I an oafish boy, uncertain whether to be feared or shamed of that which he had captured. And then, gathering all my courage, I looked up and met the confessing triumph of her eyes. For remember that a woman takes no shame in loving when once she has passed beyond the necessity of concealing it from herself.

"It is true, then?" I said, catching at my breath, for a man's heart may stand still at the first sight of Love even as before the face of Fear. But she would not answer me upon the moment, for, after all, it is the woman's place to listen and the man's to speak. Yet she will have it that he chooses only the right words —a wonderful thing, when one considers that there are but two or three of these at the most out of the millions that the scholars have packed between the covers of the dictionary. I found them, indeed, but the *verba ipsissima*, they are not to be written down here; they belong to her who heard rather than to him who spoke them, and every man must choose his own when he seeks a woman's love.

It was only when the ten minutes had all but expired that I bethought myself of my errand. Perhaps it was only fancy, but I thought that Irma's face fell when I told the great news of how du Midi had finally come to his senses, and was even now in the patriot camp and at the head of his army. Yet she went obediently to waken her father, who was asleep in an inner room, and this gave me the opportunity to recall the one condition upon which another man might claim the fulfilment of an old promise.

The day that Prince Infelix rode through the Dragon Gate of Kar—and that might be on the morrow! The word that she had given might yet be required of her, and I could not be doubtful of her answer to the call. But why should it be necessary to wait for that word? What should it matter to Irma de Czareska or to me who ruled this little corner of the big world? Let us go our own way and leave the wranglers to batter each other at their leisure. We have found, and, please God! we shall keep fast, the better things in life.

And then my cheeks burned hotly as the cold, sluggish fit passed off, and I could again distinguish black from white. Surely, if a man must choose, it is better to deserve success (or any other good thing) rather than to merely possess it. And so far as it lay in me, I did make my choice then and there.

Coventry was knocking impatiently upon the door as the General finally appeared. The old man had been deeply moved by the good news that I had brought, for he had loved du Midi as his own son. I handed him a letter that the Prince had intrusted to me in the uncertain event of my being able to communicate with the prisoners, and I could see that the affectionate words were like a strong cordial to a fainting man; he grasped my hand and shook it silently.

I explained the plan which Coventry and I had in mind, and although the old soldier knit his brows at the mention of the former's name, he announced his willingness to do whatever I thought best. Mademoiselle was already in hat and cloak, and without further delay we joined Coventry in the corridor outside. Only the stiffest of salutations were exchanged.

"I have prepared an order directing the jailer to transfer the prisoners to my custody," whispered

Coventry, "and we have only to carry off the matter with a bold face to succeed. It is understood that I am taking the prisoners to the King for examination, and you, being in Soulian uniform, are supposed to be a guard detailed to assist me. Here is a rifle," and with that he pressed a gun-barrel into my hand. "Steady now, and remember that these Soulians are born fools and achieve stupidity."

And indeed the ordeal was a simple one. The Soulian jailer had already seen and read the order, and he offered no objection to its irregularity. The grating was swung aside and we passed out into the public corridor.

At the entrance to the big court-yard Mrs. Verriker met us. The enclosure was full of men and soldiers, and here, if anywhere, we might have difficulty. But the sentry at the gate accepted our uniforms as an all-sufficient passport, and no one else vouchsafed us more than a passing glance. The night was dark and starless, and once we had plunged into the nearest side street we felt comparatively safe. Coventry led the way with his wife, Irma had her father's arm, and I brought up the rear.

So nearly as I could judge, we were heading towards the northeast quarter of the city, but, in the labyrinth of crooked streets that is old Kar, it was difficult to keep one's bearings. Still Coventry never hesitated for an instant, and we followed without asking any questions.

Finally, the enormous bulk of the city wall loomed up ahead of us, and we turned into a street that ran roughly parallel to the fortifications. For the last quarter of a mile we had not met nor seen a single person. The houses looked shut-up and deserted; to all appearances we might have been passing through a city of the dead. Suddenly Coventry pulled up short and laid his hand upon my shoulder with a cautionary gesture. I listened, and fancied that I, too, caught the sound of following footsteps. For half a minute, perhaps, we stood irresolute, but now the silence was absolute.

"Go back a couple of hundred yards," said Coventry to me in a whisper, "and I will take this alley to the right. Not any farther, for, if need be, we are close enough to our destination to make a run for it."

I walked back, counting my paces as I went, and with every sense on edge. The street was a narrow one, entirely unlighted, and the houses on either side seemed to lean towards each other, blotting out the sky itself. There were dark passages and recessed doorways in plenty, and in any one of them evil might be lurking. But I found nothing.

My two hundred yards had been paced off, and, following Coventry's instructions, it was time to turn back. Just beyond where I had halted, a high party-wall abutted into the street, completely blocking the narrow sidewalk. Should I, as a final precaution, make sure that the way beyond was clear? No; for eleven o'clock was sounding from the cathedral tower in the distant square; the night was passing, and every minute now might be of value. I counted the strokes, and then turned back, for so Fate arranges the affairs of men. And better, perhaps, than one could do it for himself, as I afterwards came to see, although my decision cost me many a regret in the hours that were immediately to come. I rejoined the waiting party, and, without asking me for a formal report, Coventry beckoned us onward.

For some six or seven hundred yards we proceeded in single file, keeping close in the shadow of the tall buildings, and then our leader made a sharp turn to the left, straight down a cul-de-sac that ended plump against the city wall. The last house on the left abutted on the wall itself, and here Coventry stopped. Taking a key from his pocket, he unlocked the street-door and motioned us to enter.

We waited for a few moments in a square hallway while Coventry relocked the door, and, as an additional precaution, shot the inner bolt. He then lit a pocket bull's-eye and led the way to an apartment at the back, passing through the two other rooms that made up the ground-floor of the house. There was no furnishing in any of them, and, judging from their musty smell, I concluded that they had been unoccupied for a long time.

As I afterwards came to know, the house had been built against rising ground, and the street level at the rear coincided with that of the first story proper. Consequently the room in which we now stood was virtually underground, and the walls were apparently windowless, and, indeed, solid, except for the connecting doors into the passage and front rooms. It was wainscoted in a dark wood, and the walls themselves were hung with tapestries representing Scriptural subjects, so far as I could make them out. One scene was evidently the flight of Absalom—a figure caught by the hair in the wide-spreading branches of an oak-tree—not an encouraging omen for our present enterprise, if one felt inclined to be superstitious. But mademoiselle only smiled as our eyes met, and the momentary shadow lifted.

The secret door in the panelling had been constructed with extraordinary cleverness. Even after Coventry had opened and closed it two or three times, I still found it difficult to see where the lines were broken into the wood-work, and it cost me half

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a dozen trials before I could put my finger upon the spring.

"And now," said Coventry, "let us be sure that we understand each other. As you have probably guessed, there is a passageway behind the panel that runs clear through the city wall and opens upon the ravine at the northeast corner of the fortifications. From there, as you will see, there is a practical path leading to the great plateau. By four o'clock it will be gray-cat light, and you and your men—"

My finger was upon his lip. To my sharpened fancy it seemed as though the suspended figure in the tapestry had suddenly advanced towards us, menacing and terrible. And then, with clearer perception, I realized that it was only the tapestry bellying out from the wall as though stirred by some wandering current of air. A simple explanation, and yet what had caused the draught? We had closed the street-door behind us, and the front windows had remained as we had found them, tightly shuttered and bolted. The door in the passage was open, and I walked over and stood for a moment upon its threshold. In the semi-darkness I could barely make out the outlines of the stairway leading to the story above us. It seemed to me that I felt the chill of passing air sweeping down from above, but the vesta that I lit burned with a flickerless flame. If a window, a door, on the ground level at the rear of the house had been opened, it had as certainly been closed again. I glanced back into the room. The tapestry hung flat and motionless against the wall.

"What is it?" demanded Coventry, impatiently. But I could only shake my head. Since he had noticed nothing I might as well keep my misgivings to myself—and, to tell the truth, I was a little ashamed of my precipitancy in materializing a bogey.

"A rat, perhaps," I answered, "or it may be that my nerves are a bit too fine drawn. It doesn't matter, only let us be getting along; I understand everything perfectly."

"Just as you say," he returned. "Now, then, mademoiselle, if you please."

We passed one by one through the door in the wainscoting, and so into the secret passage that lay beyond it. This latter was about thirty feet in length, corresponding, of course, to the thickness of the city wall. The stone curtain at the farther end looked solid to the eye, but Coventry showed me that the great slab in the centre was really fixed upon pivots, and could be turned edgewise by means of levers worked from within. There was just room on either side of the huge leaf of stone for a man to squeeze through, and we had some difficulty with the General, who had been taking on weight during the last few days. But with Coventry to haul and I to push we got him through at last, and the way of deliverance was clear before us. In front the ground fell rapidly away into the deep gorge, upon whose edge the city stood, but stretching away on the left was a narrow ridge that reached upward to the level of the plain. It was hardly more than a goat-walk, but we were not particular so long as it led to our friends and to liberty. Coventry took me aside for the last word.

"At four o'clock, then, and the signal will be three raps upon the swinging stone. Remember that the price must be in my hands before I close the bargain; not a man shall enter until the 'Cardinal's Rose' is formally handed over to me. I'm a business-like villain, Cary, and can't afford to take any risks. Finally, not more than a hundred men; they should be enough to do the trick, and with a large party the risk of discovery increases inversely. And now is there anything else?"

"Nothing; I understand perfectly the part that I have to play. But I don't like the idea of your going back alone—into that room."

"Something more than a rat behind the arras," he said, smilingly. "Nonsense! and, besides, there is the dummy ammunition to be given out, and a dozen other details for this fine Italian hand to execute. As to the mysteries of the tapestried chamber, I shall just have to chance them with the other odds against me. But no fear for me, my dear fellow; you do your part, and I shall be waiting for you when 'Big Michael' booms out four o'clock."

Coventry bowed formally to the General and to mademoiselle, and exchanged a whispered word or two with his wife. Then he stepped back into the passageway and waved his hand in final salute. The great block of stone swung slowly into place, and we were left alone upon the little space of level ground that finally narrowed off into the dangerous passage of the "Razor Edge." Five minutes of rough scrambling and we were safely over and out upon the plain. The night was still intensely dark, but a mile away a scattered light or two twinkled against the hill-side. We were within sight of the Ætolian camp.

CHAPTER XXV

ON THE "RAZOR EDGE"

IT was both good and bad news that greeted us upon our arrival in the patriot camp. The ranks of the insurgent army had been steadily filling up, and fully five thousand men had straggled in during the last dozen hours. But for the most part they were poorly armed and entirely undisciplined.

"They are brave enough, I dare say," grumbled the Baron, as we paced the platform of the railway freight station, the temporary headquarters of General Ghika, "but a word from the mouth of the dynamite-gun is what is really needed to settle our argument with Jehan."

"Where is the gun?"

"Still on its way, and the roads are getting worse, if anything. These fellows have no mechanical ability, you know."

"Then you had better superintend its transportation in person," I answered, earnestly. "My hundred men inside the walls can do nothing unless the main assault is successful. And how can you force an entrance without the gun?"

My argument could not be refuted, and the Baron, with many groans, caused himself to be hoisted upon a horse, and set out for the scene of the delay. But before his departure the good man was called upon to assist at a little dramatic climax, and, since I was a witness, it may as well be set down here.

An orderly had summoned us to the conference in the station-house, and on entering we found General Czareska alone with the Prince. I say the Prince advisedly, for somehow the old familiar name of du Midi no longer came naturally to my lips. He had changed wonderfully in these last few days; childish things had been put away and he had become a man. This was the Agricola for whom other men counted it an honor to die, Infelix of Ætolia, and already numbered with the predestined, whether it be for good or whether it be for evil.

"Mr. Cary," said the Prince, as he motioned me to a seat, "I have just been informed by General Czareska of Mr. Coventry's proposition; we must accept it without hesitation."

"You can fulfil the condition, then?" I asked, doubtfully. "The 'Cardinal's Rose'—"

"Baron Kerker can help us out there," said the Prince, turning to the banker. "Let me at last relieve you of your trust."

The Baron unbuttoned an inner pocket in his coat, and handed a jewel-case to the Prince.

The Prince took the little box and looked at it for a moment or two as it lay unopened in his hand. Then with a sudden movement he sank down on one knee and offered it to the General.

"And handsomely done, too," whispered the Baron to me as we bent over the table upon pretence of examining the big military map that lay there. "The boy has stuff in him, even if he did make a mess of it at the start. Oh, but look now! Is it not enough to set a man's blood aflame?"

The Prince had taken the great ruby from its case and was holding it out for us to see. It actually seemed as though the room were the brighter for its spark of deep-glowing fire. What a vital color is red! It lies at the heart of all living things; it is the symbol of life itself! The "Cardinal's Rose" seemed to flower as we gazed upon it.

The jewel had been newly set in a silver-gilt clasp, and the Prince used it to loop up one side of the soft felt hat that he wore.

"It was a fancy," he explained, smilingly, "of that Basil Agricola, who was a Prince both of Holy Church and of Ætolia. Steel bonnet or red hat, there must always be a place in which to stick the famous 'Cardinal's Rose,' and, as you see, not a single petal has ever fallen to the ground. May I be as fortunate, for the little time in which I am permitted to wear it."

The Baron had departed, and it was now close on to two o'clock. It was decided that our party should start at half-past four, and this gave me the opportunity for a little broken sleep, stretched out on some empty grain-bags in a corner of the freight-house.

It hardly seemed that ten minutes had passed before Stephan touched me on the shoulder, and told me that it was a quarter after the hour. The Prince still sat at the table as I had left him. He was writing busily, and had evidently not slept at all. He looked up as I scrambled to my feet and beckoned me over.

"I am going with you," he said, quietly; and then, raising his hand: "No, the question does not admit of argument, and the General will understand when he gets my note."

He sealed the letter and addressed it. "When one has wasted many days, my dear Cary, he counts even the minutes precious. Let us be off."

Narbo and his picked men were in readiness, and

ON THE "RAZOR EDGE"

we left the camp on the stroke of the half-hour. A quarter of an hour later and we had reached our taking-off place, and were preparing to string out along the jagged line of the " Razor Edge."

"Some one is coming," whispered the Prince, as I took my place at the head of the column and was about to give the word. It was Stephan, panting and holding up a letter as he ran. Narbo lit a fusee under the shelter of his cap, and the Prince and I devoured the hastily written scrawl. It ran:

> "DEAR CARY,—These Balkan children know nothing of the noble science of bridge-building, and our precious dynamite-gun is even now at the bottom of the Sankla gorge. I may add, however, that I propose to have one final fling of the dice-box, and am preparing for double-sixes. Not that they are sure to turn up, but I think the chance good enough to let you know of the possibility. So decide for yourself whether or not you will go on.
>
> " Ever yours,
>
> " KERKER."

" He must be pretty sure of his next move or he would have contented himself with the bare statement of the accident," commented the Prince, thoughtfully.

"Precisely," I returned, "for otherwise he would simply be sending us into a trap. If he gives us no hint of his plan, it must be because its success depends largely upon its unexpectedness, and this letter might have fallen into the wrong hands."

" Let us go on," said the Prince, briefly. It was still dark, but a faint glimmer upon the horizon's eastern rim showed that dawn was at hand. We picked our way along without accident, and now we were under the deeper shadow of the walls themselves. In the distance we could hear the calls of the sentries upon their rounds, but this angle of the fortifications had apparently been left unguarded. Coventry must have succeeded in getting the guards withdrawn from this particular point; at all events, we had crossed the danger zone without being discovered, and in five minutes more we were all gathered upon the little piece of level ground in front of the secret entrance. Two knocks followed by one was the prearranged signal, but my uplifted hand fell to my side as I stepped forward. The door stood wide open!

Irresolute and confounded, I stopped short, my eyes fixed upon the formless blackness of the passageway beyond. What had gone wrong? What was it that waited upon the threshold of that open door? If a rush of armed men had met us face to face, if the silence had been broken by the deadly click of a machine-gun, then indeed we might have understood and gone up to grapple with the Death that had declared itself. But before this invisible presence of Fear the tongue grew thick in the mouth and the knees were loosened. We stood and waited—a minute, an hour? It might have been either so far as I could tell.

Something—some one had brushed by me, and was even now upon the threshold. I realized blindly that I must follow, since a braver man had led the way. I lurched forward; some instinct told me that the door was closing. My outstretched fingers grazed the edge as it swung inward, but they could get no hold; my naked fists were beating uselessly upon the rough surface of the stone. The door was shut.

Some one was coming down hand over hand on a rope that had been flung from the overhanging parapet. The dark figure straightened up as his feet touched the earth, his voice rang out stridently: "Back! for your lives!"

ON THE "RAZOR EDGE"

A sudden line of fire ran along the topmost course of the battlements, and bullets shrieked stormily in our ears. Back! to the "Razor Edge," or we are dead men! Cursing and struggling, the men streamed out upon the narrow causeway and fought with each other for a footing while Death thundered from above and waited in the abyss below.

The fire from the ramparts was almost continuous, and if the marksmen had been a trifle cooler headed they could have wiped out the lot of us in no time. But for the most part the Soulians shot wildly, and our line was now spread out along the ridge and half shrouded in the dense mist of a foggy dawn.

But every now and then a man would stumble as he ran and pitch forward into the chasm. A misstep or a Martini bullet, it was all one in the end—that dreadful hundred yards, was it then interminable?

I was closing the file and was perhaps half-way across when my left arm suddenly fell as though by its own volition, and the shock spun me half-way round on my heel. The tall fir-trees, whose tops just showed clear above the level of the precipice, bent over and made as though they would catch me in their swaying branches. I had an odd sort of feeling that they meant kindly—surely they would hold me securely until help came; I had only to fall quietly into their friendly arms. Then a strong hand seized me, and I felt myself pulled up and onward—

Coventry was bending over me as I opened my eyes.

"It is nothing much," he said, cheerily. "A bullet through the forearm, and the tourniquet has stopped the bleeding."

I sat up and looked about me. We were in a little grassy hollow, a couple of hundred yards back from the gorge, and in comparative safety. The men were scattered about just as they had flung themselves down after their hard run. Narbo came over to where I was sitting. He had a blood-stained bandage bound around his head, and his face was white and drawn with pain.

"You have lost—how many?" I asked.

"A dozen, perhaps, not more."

"And the Prince, where is he?"

Narbo looked at Coventry without replying.

"Will you answer?" My voice died away in my throat.

"The Prince," said Coventry, gravely, "is among the missing."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE BARON'S DICE-BOX

COVENTRY'S story was soon told. He had made his way back to the palace without difficulty, and been busy for a couple of hours in overseeing the serving out of the ammunition—the defective lot, as you remember. So far there had not been a hitch in the programme, and his arrest at four o'clock, when about to leave the palace for the secret rendezvous, came as an unpleasant surprise. My forebodings had been amply confirmed; we had been suspected and followed and spied upon, and there was only one man who could have thus tripped us up—Maître Étienne Vauclot. "You were right in fearing that he had recognized you," concluded Coventry, "and with that thread in his hand it was an easy matter to explore the labyrinth."

"But you were arrested, you say?" and I looked at Coventry as though I doubted his material presence.

He laughed. "Well, they did go through the formal ceremony, but my legs moved quicker than their wits, or even the bullets of the sentries at the gates. I had nothing to gain by submission, and I might be able to warn you in time. So I let the fellow nearest to me have it between the eyes, and cut away for the cover of the nearest side street. It was all over in a half-minute, but it took me a good deal longer than that to make up my mind to the next step. I knew that the 'House-on-the-Wall' must be already in the enemy's hands, but I ran the risk of making assurance sure, entering the house from the rear, just as our good friend Vauclot had done. Of course, as I had feared, the trap had been set, and in the tapestried chamber sat King Jehan's men, waiting calmly for the little flies to walk into their parlor. Then I happened to stumble over some rope, and you can guess the rest."

"If you had only come a minute or two sooner," I said, gloomily.

"You are thinking about du Midi—or, I should say, the Prince," he returned. "But are you sure that he was with you when the retreat to the 'Razor Edge' began? I am certain that I did not see him at any time."

And then the remembrance of that open door came back upon me, and I was silent.

We reached the camp, and I went at once to General Czareska with my story of loss and of failure. He heard me patiently and with never a word of reproach. The Prince had chosen to go his own way, and the burden of his rashness must rest upon his own shoulders. But I, being sore both in body and in mind, would not accept these consolatory platitudes.

"Our opera-comique war is over," I said, bitterly, "and in the eyes of Europe we are nothing more than a pack of naughty children who deserve to be well tawsed for our behavior. To-morrow the commissioner of the Powers will give us all a wigging and send us home in disgrace. And the day after that our punishment will begin—in the comic weeklies."

And then, having vented my spleen, I went incontinently to the other extreme, and, in the fervor of new-born devotion to the cause, I offered to lead the forlorn hope, an assault of the walls by means of scaling-ladders. It is charitable to conclude that I was a trifle light-headed from the fever of my wound. I have an indistinct recollection that it was mademoiselle herself who held the composing draught to my lips, and I doubt if I would have received it from other hands than hers.

It was wonderful what those two or three hours of rest did for me, and when, at eight o'clock, Stephan brought me coffee and a handful of biscuit, I was quite ready for anything. I gulped down my soldier's breakfast and hurried outside. A beautiful day and July 10th.

Neither the General nor mademoiselle were visible, and I concluded that they must be in the camp, a quarter of a mile away. I could see that the lines were being formed. Could it be possible that the attack was in contemplation? Had the dynamite-gun arrived at last?

A hundred yards down the track was a low stone building, and opposite it stood a car of the ordinary gondola pattern. Two or three men were engaged in loading it from the storehouse, and Coventry and the Baron were watching the operation. I ran to meet them.

"Well?" I said, breathlessly.

"I am in excellent health," returned the Baron, politely. "How is your arm?"

Coventry smiled, but I had no mind at present to disturb the good man's innocence of idiom.

"The dynamite-gun?" I questioned.

"Alas! no; but still I am hoping to make my lucky throw. See, they are filling the box now with the dice."

"And loaded ones, too," put in Coventry. "Hardly a square game, my dear Baron."

I had recognized at once those peculiar-looking cylinders that the workmen were handling so carefully—giant-powder cartridges such as are used in mining and in railway work.

"The single track, you know," said Coventry, "runs directly through the Dragon Gate, and the truss-bridge across the old moat is still in position. Once over the hill, the force of gravity will take charge of the Baron's dice-box and see that the 'bones' are well scattered. It will be even more magnificent than if it were war."

And, indeed, nothing could be more simple. An engine would push the car up the grade to the summit of the hill a quarter of a mile away, and then let it go for that final downward rush, which would hurl it and its terrible cargo against the defences of the city. It would be the heaviest shot ever fired in the history of warfare. It must infallibly arrive at the exact spot at which it was aimed, and there could be no doubt but that its destructive energy would be let loose at just the right moment and in just the right place. The only chance of failure was that the car might jump the track, but that was not likely to happen. With the breach once made the army would be responsible for the rest. I turned to the Baron and took off my hat.

"My compliments, Baron. Your dice-box is plainly a lucky one, and I predict that the throw will be double-sixes. Are you going to toss the box yourself?"

"Of course there will be some one at the throttle of the engine," said the Baron, "and the honor is naturally mine—"

"But you have already agreed to resign in my favor," interrupted Coventry, "and I shall hold you to your word."

"All right, my boy," said the Baron, equably; "it was a fair toss-up, and you shall have your place at the levers. And now, my dear Nicholas, let me recommend that you rejoin the General. It is already half after eight, and the dice-box is to be shaken at nine precisely."

An engine had been brought up from the roundhouse, and Coventry, with a parting smile at me, jumped on the foot-board and began to try the mouth of his iron steed under the tutelage of the stoker. Coventry was no novice at the business, but every engine has its idiosyncrasies, and it was the part of wisdom to learn them before the ride began. The stoker, by-the-way, was not to take the trip. The programme looked simple enough—merely the pushing of the car over the summit of the grade and then letting it run away by itself; but for all that something might happen, and the stoker was a wise man in declining to take the risk. Strange that this man, so far-seeing on his own account, should have been so purblind where another's safety was concerned. But Fate works with just such clumsy tools, and there is always one lying ready to her hand when there is mischief to be done.

There was nothing that I could do here, and I might be of some use to the General at the camp. And so, with a parting grip from Coventry's strong hand (I am glad now for the impulse that made me offer my own in farewell), I walked up the track to the grassy plateau upon which the patriot army was massed, a heterogeneous mob, out of which the few officers who understood tactics were trying to form something resembling company lines. Their task was a difficult one, and to my untrained eye it looked hopeless. But little by little order was evolved from the confusion. Drawn up on either side of the railway track stood the serried ranks of the revolutionaries, silent and expectant.

The hill-side that we occupied had an elevation slightly exceeding that of the city, and consequently overlooked the walls. The distance was not much over half a mile, and the movements of the enemy were plainly visible. Since early dawn the tops of the houses overlooking the walls had been black with people, all eagerly curious to miss no detail of the coming spectacle, whatever it might be. One could almost hear the hum of rumor's thousand tongues. "The patriots are about to risk everything in a desperate assault upon the impregnable walls"—"King Jehan has been assassinated"—"Prince Infelix is dead, a prisoner"—"Sarkof is on his way, within the hour his bugles will be sounding at the Dragon Gate"—"It will be each one for himself, and no favors for anybody." And so the tongues wagged on, while the Soulian artillerymen stood at their guns on the walls below and watched the dusty Kavan road for the first glint of Sarkof's rescuing bayonets. And then upon us, aligned along the green hill-side, and upon them, who manned the blackened walls of Kar, there descended a silence great and sudden. Face to face we looked upon each other and waited, and involuntarily my mind went back to what must have been a very similar scene, the taking of Jericho by the Israelites. Here was the same apparent absence of offensive operations, the same silent beleaguering of the city, the children of Israel serenely confident that it was the Lord God of Hosts who fought for them; the inhabitants of Jericho mysteriously oppressed by the shadow of the coming evil, conscious of their danger and yet powerless to avert it. An ill-starred company, those men of Jericho! Poor devils! None of the commentators have ever thought it worth while to say a good word upon their part and lines in the drama. Their business was simply to fall down with the walls, while the Israelites shouted and went up, sword in hand, upon them.

Step by step I edged along until I came to where the General sat like an equestrian statue, his binoculars fixed upon the Dragon Gate and his other hand holding his opened watch. He bent over his saddlebow to greet me.

"Irma is with Stephan on the other side of the track," he whispered. "Will you go to her? Stephan has a horse for you."

I nodded assent and hurried off, for it lacked but a few minutes of the hour, and I wanted the opportunity to exchange a word or two with mademoiselle. And yet when I rode up alongside of her I felt that the seal of the common silence had been pressed upon our lips also, and that we must not break it.

And now with the first boom of the big bell in the cathedral clock-tower a curious thing happened. As though swayed by some inexplicable but overmastering impulse, the watchers on the house-tops and the soldiers on the walls were seeking safety in flight. Helter-skelter, Soulians and cits together streamed down like disturbed ants from their points of vantage, and the walls of Kar were tenantless. A few officers did their best to check the rout, but their voices could not contend against the clamor of the panic-stricken throng, and they were quickly swept aside. Well, so much the better that the victory should be a bloodless one; coming immediately upon this scene of senseless terror, the rattle of the Baron's infernal dice must infallibly have an impressive moral effect.

The last stroke of nine merged insensibly into the steadily augmenting hum of the rails at our feet—Coventry was coming. The summit of the grade was at the precise point where we were waiting, and

Coventry must have backed his train for a quarter of a mile or so in order to get a good running start.

The thunderbolt passed almost at arm's-length, but I scarcely saw it, and I know that I did not hear a sound. All of my faculties were focussed upon the distant target, the four-square bulk of the Dragon Gate, clear-cut against the blue of the morning sky. It looked as immovable as the granite hills around it, impregnable as the battlements of heaven itself.

To my eyes it seemed that the mass of moving metal barely touched the masonry, merging into it as imperceptibly as one dissolving picture blends with another in a magic-lantern show. But the impenetrable veil of yellow dust that in the next instant hung before the scene prevented me from grasping even the smallest among the subsequent details of the catastrophe. Nor had my ear been able to register the echoes of the explosion ; I could only realize that the earth-wave born of the shock was at this instant passing under our feet. I saw Irma's lips go white and felt my own head spinning. Then, with the passing of the qualm, I realized that the curtain of smoke and dusty haze was growing thinner ; there! it was lifting in the wind, and we could look straight up into the great square of Saint Michael over the razed and shattered fragments of the Dragon Gate. And for fifty yards on either side there were great breaches in the solid walls, room enough and to spare for all who might care to enter. I caught one glimpse of the General's face as he spurred forward, such a look as Joshua himself might have worn when he bade the people shout in witness that the Lord had given them the victory. And so the orange and black banners swept forward, and the men of Ætolia stood in the breaches of the city, and there was none to withstand them, seeing that great fear was fallen upon all the inhabitants of Kar.

Irma insisted upon going on, and we followed the rush at a distance that accorded better with her impatience than with my ideas of discretion. As we trotted past the shapeless heap that had been the Dragon Gate, I caught sight of the driving-wheel of a locomotive among the ruins. And lying there under the wreckage was a brown Alpine hat, in whose band a gay little cock's feather had been stuck jauntily. Irma's voice recalled me.

"I thought you knew," she said, softly. "He waved his hand to you as he went by."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE "HEART OF KAR"

ELEVEN o'clock, and the "Heart of Kar" still holds out against us. The King's palace, as you remember, is a fortress, a citadel in itself, and it is ill work cracking nuts with one's teeth. Of what avail are bill-hooks and pikes against the ten-foot masonry that stops our way? And yet this particularly hard nut must be smashed if we are to enjoy the fruits of victory. Behind the frowning walls of the "Heart of Kar" still sits intrenched the *de facto* government of King Jehan, his royal standard yet floats from the topmost pinnacle of the Red Tower. And if these were not good and sufficient reasons, be it known that our Necessity rides with even a sharper spur. Prince Infelix is held a prisoner within the "Heart of Kar."

The fact has been established by the voluntary testimony of a prisoner who had assisted Vauclot in setting the trap at the "House-on-the-Wall." It was the Prince who had pushed by me at that last moment and had entered the open door. Fortunately his person had been recognized, and it had been our informant's own hand that had struck up the levelled weapons. Alive and unharmed! There was an immense relief in that simple fact, but what now?

The Baron touched me on the arm: "We have a six-pounder here, a modern piece, and in serviceable condition—only—"

"Only what?"

"We have nothing to feed the infant. The shells belonging to it are dummies, a pinch of powder to a bushel of sawdust."

Indeed! but Coventry had done his work almost too well. But wait! let me think—I remembered vaguely of his telling me how he had separated the genuine from the false ammunition; he had even gone so far in his confidences as to intrust me with the whereabouts of the secret storehouse. I buried my face in my hands, concentrating every mental energy in the effort to remember what I had seen and heard.

And then the blurred lines of the picture grew sharp before my closed eyes; I saw it again, a curiously gabled house with a long gilt-lettered sign above the shop-front—the very words, "Articles de Paris." I looked up, and there was the house itself, directly across the square. Our brave lads would have torn the place into match-wood with their bare fingers had it been necessary; now we had food enough and to spare for our beautiful child of thunder. "Be sure and speak up bravely, *petite*, so that our Prince can hear you," said the good Baron as he closed the breech-block with his own hands. The piece was rolled forward to within point-blank range of the great iron-studded gates. I looked at my watch; it wanted a quarter to twelve o'clock.

"One moment, gentlemen."

A casement in the gate-tower had been thrown open, and a solitary figure appeared upon the overhanging balcony of stone. For the last time Étienne Vauclot and I were to stand face to face, and as our glances met it seemed that he was speaking to me alone. But then looks do not kill. He went on, speaking with smooth deliberation:

"You see, it all depends upon who has the last word in this little affair of ours. You, monsieur, are preparing a smashing argument, but it is not an unanswerable one. I reply I have only to lift my hand. But you do not understand. Let me present you to his Highness, Prince Infelix—for the time being my guest."

Behind him, in the embrasure of the window, stood the Prince, and farther back in the room there was the glint of sunshine upon the steel of a rifle-barrel. Yes, I understood.

Maître Vauclot cleared his throat delicately, and went on—in French, be it remembered.

"His Majesty, King Jehan, is expecting some other guests, and indeed they may arrive at any moment. Of course, I am alluding to General Sarkof of the Soulian army, and our good friend the commissioner of the Powers. It is manifestly improper that these gentlemen should happen upon the unseemly spectacle of a family quarrel, and although we should not care to parley with a mob under ordinary circumstances, it is the earnest wish of his Majesty that we should come to an understanding. If you will agree to retire quietly you may take with you the person of this misguided young man, and we will consider the incident as closed. But against violence we must protect ourselves. The instant that gun is fired, I raise my hand. It is a simple gesture, but my men in the room will understand and will obey. We need not discuss the matter in further detail; a Soulian army corps is already within sight of the walls of Kar, and the commissioner of the Powers is strictly enjoined to notice and to recognize the *status quo*, and that alone. That is all, I think."

And now the Prince was speaking, and in that great silence every syllable fell like a hammer-blow upon our hearts. Only a dozen simple words, but vital with the rhetoric of an invincible resolution, and we who listened had only to obey. Then, as quietly as he had come, he turned and disappeared within the apartment. Vauclot still kept his place upon the balcony, erect and watchful. But I could see that one hand had sought the support of the balustrade, and that he was breathing heavily. An old gray wolf, but he faced us all gallantly at that last moment.

The distant note of an army bugle seemed to be the signal upon which we were all waiting. I never heard the General give the word; it must have been that the gunner had taken it unuttered from his lips. Nor did my eyes follow the course of the shell as it smashed fair upon the gates, and then, exploding, hurled them from their hinges. I saw only the stone balcony and him who stood thereon.

As the Prince finished speaking, Vauclot turned to give the signal to his men within the room. It was but a little thing—a vagrant puff of wind, and the handkerchief had dropped from the outstretched hand and was fluttering slowly downward. With the darting plunge of a hawk the old man leaned far over the balustrade and clutched at it—a bare half-inch, but he had missed.

It must have been that the mortar in the ancient stone-work of the balustrade had loosened and fallen away, for the entire railing gave under the pressure, and Vauclot, overbalanced by the shock, had no chance to recover himself. The distance to the pavement was hardly more than a dozen feet; in itself the fall was not necessarily fatal. But as the man's body plunged through the air it suddenly seemed to meet with an invisible obstruction; arrested in midflight, it spun completely around, was flung violently upward, and then pitched heavily to earth, a shapeless, headless trunk. Incredible as it may appear, the man had fallen directly in the path of the six-pound shell, and at the precise moment to receive the full impact of the missile.

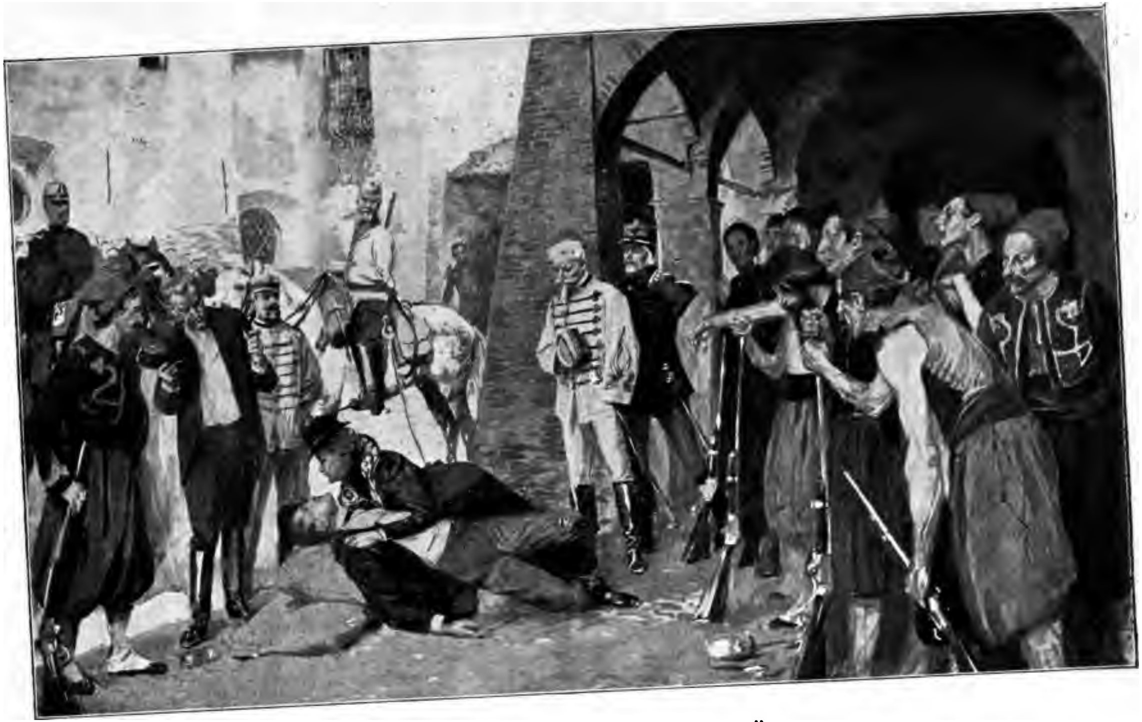
So passed Étienne Vauclot, and with him the evil that he had done.

The court-yard of the palace was held by the King's body-guard, but they offered no resistance to our victorious inrush. Cowed and leaderless, they were only too ready to throw down their arms, and the "Heart of Kar" was won.

To Stephan's care had been committed the royal standard of the house of Agricola, and he had been the second man to pass the shattered gateway. The Baron stepped up, and, quickly removing the banner from the shaft, handed it to Captain Narbo, with a significant look in the direction of the Red Tower. And the young Ætolian, comprehending instantly, threw himself into the thick of the crowd and began shouldering his way to the tower entrance.

It was the Baron again who summoned a couple of axemen and set them to work at the door of the apartment over the gateway in which the Prince had been held a prisoner. Crash! and it had been splintered into match-wood. Splendid machines! that file of Soulian soldiers, who still held their levelled pieces and waited for the signal that had never come. Let us credit them with an honest dislike for the task that they had been set; at least they offered no resistance to the eager hands that wrested away their weapons.

Once again Prince Infelix looked upon his people, and even while they shouted there was the trampling of



"AND THEN ALL WENT FROM ME"

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horses' feet at the gate, and an official-looking gentleman in plain clothes rode in at the head of a brilliant staff. He looked doubtfully up at the Red Tower, but Narbo had at last succeeded in getting a pull upon the halyards, and the wind was even now straightening out the heavy folds of the royal standard of Ætolia.

"Let me be the first to offer my congratulations to your Majesty," said the commissioner of the Powers, with the most affable of smiles. But Infelix looked only at the woman who had come forward before us all and placed both her hands in his. One must keep faith where a promise has been given, and surely he had borne himself like a man in this the final day of his probation. And again all the people shouted, and the King smiled at Irma and drew her closer to his side.

It was just as well that I had turned my eyes away, or I should not have caught that momentary flash of sun on steel. Once before had I looked up at that window in the Red Tower, and I remembered the man who had stood there talking to a parrot. The purple hangings of the window served to accentuate the dead-white pallor of King Jehan's face, but the rifle-barrel rested like a rock on the window-sill, and there was no hesitancy of purpose in that final glance along the sights.

There was the crash of a thousand muskets in my ears as I plunged forward, literally shouldering Infelix and mademoiselle to one side. They were safe, and I too was unharmed. The triumphant thrill rose to ecstasy as I remembered how cleverly I had diverted the course of the bullet by that one turn of the hand. There it lay now, crushed and flattened against the opposite wall. The trick had been so easy—every one should learn it—to-morrow I should take Irma—

"Missed!" and I laughed aloud and snapped my fingers in the Red Tower's face. Incredible! but the monstrous stone thing laughed back at me—at me whose statue already overtopped its puny height, an ant-hill that mocked at the Himalayas. But I must be quick if I would punish this insolent of a Red Tower. Already my head is striking against the vaulted sky—the blue mistiness of the empyrean is drawn as a veil before my eyes—now I have cracked the shell and I am drinking the pure ether of the upper space—the world a round ball with which children play—a pin-head—

And then all went from me as when one draws a wet sponge across a blackboard.

CHAPTER XXVIII

INTO THE LIGHT

IT seemed to me that the room was very dark in which I sat, and certainly I had never left it. And yet in some mysterious way I knew that outside there was light and music and flowers, and that these were good to look upon. But in the room it was dark, and rightly so, for there is nothing worth seeing in an empty room.

Now and then it happened that people from this outside world came into the darkened room and looked sorrowfully upon me. But we did not speak, and I was never able to find the door by which they entered and departed. But each time they came it pleased me to think that they left behind them a little of that light from the beautiful world outside, and in time I came to see that my room was not so empty as I had supposed.

It was the red rose that I noticed first, although I did not know then that it was called a rose, nor even that it was a flower. But its color pleased me. And when one day I chanced to press it to my lips, it seemed as though it were trying to speak to me. It was pleasant to listen, even though I could not understand what it said. And from that time on the darkness in the room grew thinner, and I used to imagine that I could easily push it back into the corners whenever I wanted to look at my red rose.

It is difficult work retracing my steps amid these uncertain shadows of the past, and so I cannot be sure of how I came to know of the closed window that needed but a touch to open it. But I do recall how the glorious sunshine streamed in, and how I revelled in its light and warmth. What difference did it make that I was still unable to find the door? Now that the sun had entered, I was content to remain in my room.

His name was Stephan, so he told me, and after many trials I learned to say it after him. And then my own name, but that I never cared to use; it seemed foolish that a man should need any mark by which he should know himself.

Stephan was very good to me, and he taught me many things—words, and the name of things, and how I should hold my fork at table. And finally he brought out a chess-board and made me learn the pieces and the moves. After a little while it came to me easily, and we had many a battle. I may say, too, without boasting, that the pupil was soon more than a match for his master. I won so invariably that in time I conceded Stephan odds, lest I should beat him too easily.

But one day things did not go well, and try as I would I could not turn the tide of defeat. From trivial mistakes I went on to egregious blunders; and yet I was not wholly to blame, for who could do anything against that detestable red castle of Stephan's? It was not content with its square on the chessboard, already it had crowded off all the other pieces, it was filling the room, and the walls were cracking under the strain. And now its enormous bulk had almost blotted out the sky; I could see the ivy clinging to its stones, the great flag waving from its battlements.

Stephan laughed and said "check." I stared at him stupidly; what did he want me to do?

"Check, m'sieu," repeated Stephan, and then wonderingly: "No; not that! the King, m'sieu! the King!"

"The King!" and I sent the chessmen flying as I sprang to my feet. "The King! and what is it that the commissioner of the Powers is saying so politely? The King! and Irma with her hand in his, and beyond—the Red Tower!"

Then the scattered shining points resolved themselves again into the clear light of day and I saw clearly. I put aside Stephan's restraining arms and walked to the window. The trees were clothed in the invisible green and purple of the first spring, and in the garden outside my window there was a brave show of crocus-beds and of hyacinths.

"Is it spring, then?" and I looked at Stephan.

"April, Excellenza; we have had an unusually early season."

"Ah, yes; and yesterday was July 10th. It has been a long night, Stephan."

"Yes, Excellenza, but I was sure that it would be morning at last. The great physician from Vienna was not certain, but a woman's eyes are sharper even than those wonderful rays that the doctors use when they want to see what is going on in one's head. Mademoiselle would have it so, and I believed her. And now any fool can see that she was right."

I walked over to the mirror and looked at myself. A little stouter if anything, and plenty of color in face and lips. Then I noticed the scar over my left temple, and how it ran up under the hair. Mechanically I tried to trace its course with my finger.

"The bullet, Excellenza," said Stephan. "But the operation was wonderfully successful, and you were walking around within the week, a well man, m'sieu; it was remarkable."

"Then the difficulty was here?" and I touched my forehead. The poor fellow looked embarrassed.

"Excellenza!" he exclaimed, deprecatingly. "It was only that m'sieu had lost his remembrance of things and he had to learn them over again. But now it has all come back—is it not so?"

I went again to the window and looked out. Certainly this was not Kar, and there was something very familiar in the blackened façade of a wing that ran off at an angle from the main building.

"The Château Czareska?"

"Perfectly, m'sieu. That was the east wing, where the fire started, as m'sieu doubtless remembers."

So they had brought me here. I was glad that Stephan had left the room on some trifling errand, I wanted a chance to think this over quietly. It is no small thing for a man to have nine months blotted out of his life. It is a long time, and many things may happen while a man sleeps.

Nearly a year since I had sailed out of New York Harbor! By this time my few friends and relatives had assuredly mourned me as dead. Even Murchison must have grown tired of waiting for me at the Grand Central Station, and my sub-editorship at the *New World* had long since been turned over to a better man. My small estate had doubtless been administered; by this time my very name had been forgotten, unless some one had thought enough of me to have had it chiselled upon a monument at Woodlawn. I had simply dropped out of my old existence, swallowed up in the ocean of the unknown, without even a ripple to mark the place where Nicholas Cary had gone down.

Well, I had lived, if even for those few weeks, I must not forget that. And even if it were again in my power to make the choice—well, I dare say the decision would be the same. To look once upon the pictured face of a woman, and forthwith to set out for the edge of the world—could anything have been more absurd? And yet, and yet—

Why had I not dared to ask outright for her whose name was ever trembling upon my lips—for Irma? Surely it were better to know the truth, although I could have no doubt of the answer. And yet I would hear it in plain words, and Stephan was again at my side.

"The King, Stephan?"

"Ætolia, Excellenza, is free and happy. Can I say more?"

"And the Queen?"

"The Queen! But I had forgotten that m'sieu does not know. There is no Queen—as yet."

"As yet?"

"The wedding-day is set for to-morrow. What joy that m'sieu is himself again, and will be able to assist at the spectacle!"

Joy! Who would desire to be born again if he must pass through a second death? Would that I still sat in the darkened room, if only for this last day and for that to-morrow! But these are the issues that lie upon the knees of the gods.

"Then mademoiselle is here—in the château?" I demanded, abruptly. The question answered itself, for as I glanced through the open door I saw her coming swiftly along the corridor. She stopped for an instant at the table to put the rose she carried into a tall water-glass, and then came over to where I was standing.

She took my hand as though it had been that of a little child who needed to be guided along a difficult pathway. I did not look up; the wild thought had seized me that the old mask might still serve me for this last day. But there is a sixth sense in woman with which I had not reckoned, and it could not be deceived. Suddenly she drew away from me with a little gasping cry.

"I did not intend that you should know," I said, quietly. "By to-morrow morning I should have been across the frontier."

And then, in answer to her mute inquiry:

"It is because I am a coward. I can find strength to go away, to give you up once and forever, but to remain, that is a different matter. My self-surrender must be a single act; I should not know how to carry it on from day to day and from hour to hour. He will understand—I mean Infelix."

"Infelix!" she echoed, wonderingly. And then, with a new note in her voice: "I had forgotten that you did not know. He died quite suddenly, six months or more ago."

"But there is a King," I stammered. "Stephan even told me of the wedding-day—fixed for to-morrow."

"Theodore Agricola, of the younger branch. You knew him when he was simply Captain Narbo." She tried to withdraw her hand, but I would not let it go.

"He is to be married to-morrow," I went on, stupidly.

"Well, monsieur, there are other women in the world."

An incontestable fact, but I do not think that Irma greatly resented my inability to recognize it. Feminine intuition and masculine thick-wittedness are equally matters of wondering delight to the opposite sex, and a man who has stared too long at the sun may be expected to be a trifle blind to less glorious objects.

Even as she spoke she was gone, passing through the long French window and disappearing into the green wilderness of the garden. Yet somehow she contrived that I should know how to follow her flying footsteps.

It has taken me some little while to knit up each and every ravelled end of memory, but I have them all now. And first of Infelix.

He had learned the truth from Irma's face at the moment when I was struck down by Jehan's bullet. But she did not know of this until that dreadful day three months later when Infelix lay dying, crushed and broken under the weight of that black devil of a Transylvanian stallion.

"It is better thus," he had whispered as she bent over him. "The doctors had only given me a year at the farthest, and it hurts more to be cut up by inches. Nicholas will get well, and when he does, remember that it was my wish."

So Infelix died, and they took him up and buried him in the sepulchre of the kings of Ætolia. And all the land mourned for him many days.

Was it an accident with poor Coventry, or not? No one could ever say certainly just how the blunder happened. When he backed the engine and car to get headway the two were of course coupled together. But he had come to a full stop before reversing at the round-house to give the stoker a chance to cut out the connection. When questioned, the man insisted that he had done his duty, but under pressure he acknowledged that he was excited and anxious to get away from the dangerous vicinity of the dynamite-car. The coupling was of a patent kind and complicated in operation. Under the circumstances it was not impossible that the unlocking process had not been fully carried out. And so when at the critical moment Coventry attempted to set the engine brakes and let the car run away, he suddenly found that the connection between the two was still unbroken. It would seem that he might have stopped both car and engine if only he had acted promptly, but this is pure conjecture. It was on a down-grade at top speed, the flat-car had no brake-pipe, and it is always possible that the air-pump did not work. All we can say is that he did his duty and went down like a brave man to his death. Surely to such a one much may be forgiven of his errors in life. His monument in the cathedral is evidence that Ætolia is not unmindful of her debt to his memory, and Mrs. Verriker is still a member of our household. But somehow she gets along better with the children, who adore her, than with either Irma or me. Some memories remain.

The Baron makes us a visit every year, and the last time he was here I asked him for the solution of a little mystery that had always puzzled me.

"Baron," I said, "do you remember a rather odd circumstance connected with your abduction? At the last moment you wrote a note, which the General read, and which was then forwarded to its destination. Of course, it was your own private business, and may be yet. But perhaps at this late day you may be willing to satisfy my curiosity."

The Baron looked at the General, and both laughed heartily.

"As you say, my dear Nicholas," answered the Baron, "it is late in the day, and the business has long ago been settled up. As you remember, the letter was to my confidential agent, M. Bert. I was heavily interested in the stock-market, and I realized that my taking off would produce a mild sort of crisis. So I instructed my man to sell all along the line—a bear raid, as you would call it in Wall Street. And the slaughter, my dear boy, oh, it was terrible! Consols and Egyptians tumbled like a pack of cards, and I gathered in my millions on the rebound. A good stroke, you will say, but still it was a fair game, and took nerve to win it. You remember how the automobile broke down on the road, how near the gendarmes came to nipping us at Havre, and, finally, that booby of a French lieutenant? Had that shot from the *Diane* gone through the machinery of the *Sea Fox* I should have been rescued, and it would have cost me twenty million francs to settle up my contracts. Do you wonder that I prayed to be delivered from my friends?"

And once again, and for the last time, I rise and say, solemnly:

"Baron, you are indeed a great man."

THE END

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